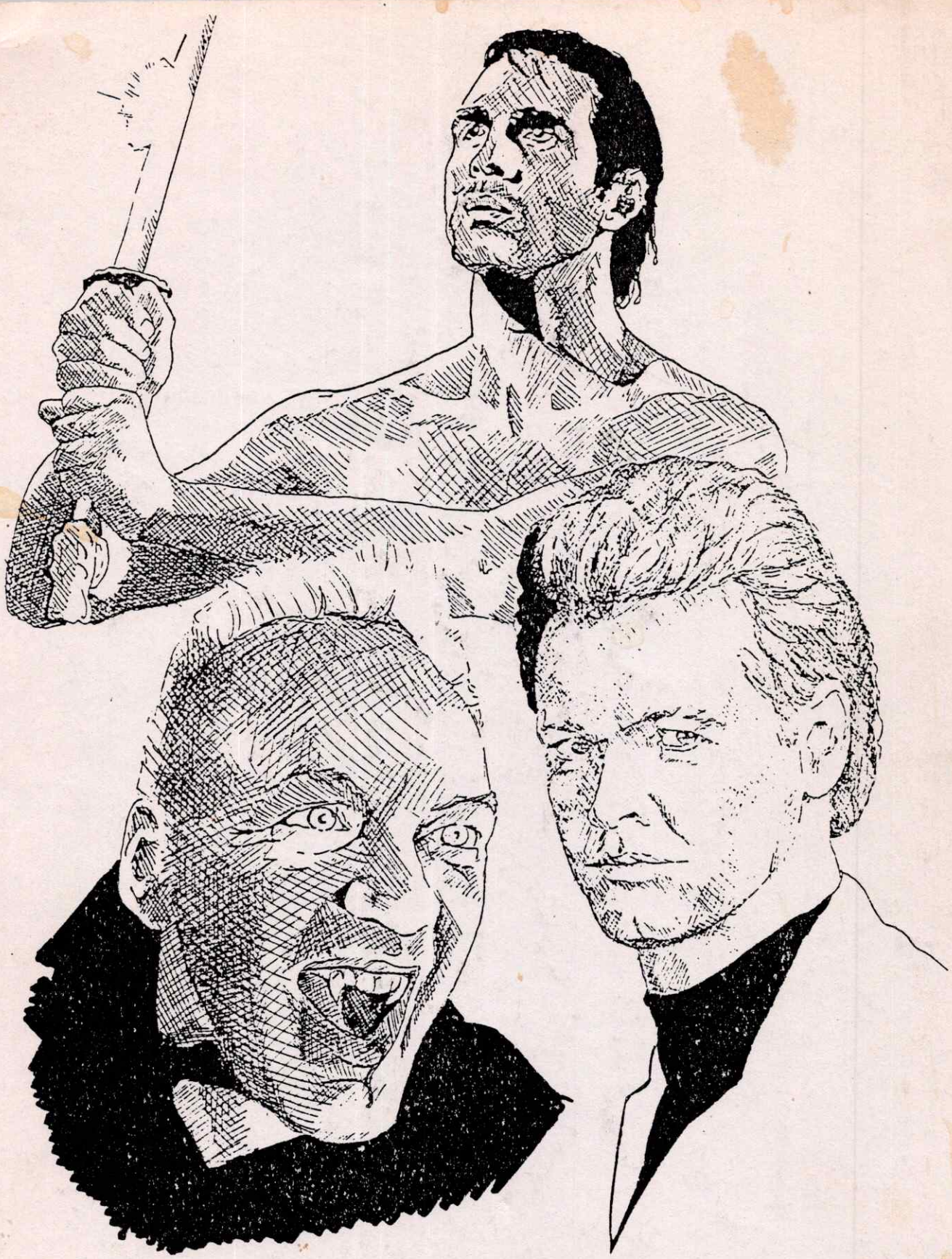

FOREVER

FOREVER

PRINTING HISTORY
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The editor/publisher.

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Table of Contents

Title *Page*

Introduction 5

To Drive the Cold Winter Away
by Valerie Meachum 6

Bring Me Home Tonight
by Tanya Beaty 13

Dark Angel
by Sandra Alexis Chisholm 17

Invitation to the Dance
by Susan M. Garrett 34

The Last Rose
by Hilary McLachlan 41

White Christmas
by Tara O'Shea 47

A Woman's Work
by Susan M. Garrett 53

From the Files of the Watchers...
FILE #1027, "Niamh O'Brien" 56

We'll Always Have Paris
by Tara O'Shea 59

Darius
by Kathleen Y. Bergeron 79

Tommy Brooks, Esq.
by Amy Denton 81

A Roll in the Hay
by Jo Leahy 90

A Change of Perspective
by Selma McCrory 94

Table of Contents (Con't.)

Title *Page*

The Rules
by Kathleen Y. Bergeron 104

Compar'd With Loss of Thee
by Jo Leahy 106

Nothing Less
by Kathleen Y. Bergeron 110

The Quick and the Dead
by Wendy Milner 112

Til Time and Times Are Done
by Tara O'Shea 125

The Last Word 153

All Artwork by Tara O'Shea

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Introduction

You know, I must have been out of my mind. I'd co-edited before, but taking the big, scary step to editor in February of this year seemed like a great idea at the time. Never mind I had no idea if I could get enough material (I did. In fact, I have enough for a head start on Volume II) or even any at all, and I'm fairly new to Forever Knight and Highlander fandoms. I didn't know how well a new zine would be received.

Thanks to all the enthusiastic fans on the Internet who put up with me out of the kindness of their hearts (I can hear you laughing, stop that this instant) I'm happy to present some really brilliant stuff (with some of my shlock thrown in for good measure) that I hope you'll enjoy.

Sorry for the sparse artwork, but I had trouble getting my hot little mitts on photographs, not to mention the copious spare time I need that school is determine to take up with silly stuff like finals. Honestly, college priorities are completely out of whack.

Well, here's my first almost solo effort. I say almost because lots of thanks are due here to partner-in-crime Monica (who bemoans her loss of anonymity since she met me, since I insist on mentioning her all the time), as well as my sister Deirdre, Susan Garrett who lets me pester her about fanfic when she should be partying at conventions, and all my contributors as well as all the other fans who made this zine possible. Without your encouragement, I probably would have done this anyway, but not nearly as well. Cheers, guys.

P.S.

All the mistakes (especially the grammatical ones, commas have always confused me) are mine. No matter how many passes I made over the material, I always seem to miss really obvious little goofs, so I apologise in advance for all the stuff I missed during the last pass....

June, 1994
Tara O'Shea
aka LJC

To Drive the Cold Winter Away

by Valerie Meachum

"KNIGHT. OUT." STONETREE stood by Nick's desk, implacable as his name.

"Captain, I've—"

"Worked the last two Christmas Eves, and Christmas too," the captain finished for him. "Out. Go home. Take Schanke up on Myra's dinner invitation. I don't care. Just leave those papers where they are, get yourself out the door, and don't show your face in here again until the calendar says December 26. That's an order, Detective."

* * *

Natalie didn't even look up from her computer at his unexpected entrance. "Hi, Nick. What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question."

"I'm not the one Stonetree has banned from work for the next two days."

Mimicking her tone, Nick retorted, "And I'm not the one who's been coughing and sneezing almost as much as she's been breathing for the past week."

Natalie chuckled. "I guess it is kind of a toss up who's the pot and who's the kettle, huh?"

"My question is," Nick said, leaning over the computer monitor, "can anyone tell by looking which one of us is dead?"

"Oh, thanks a lot!" Natalie squawked, interrupting herself with a sneeze and reaching for the near-empty box of Puffs Plus. "Anyway, I can't look like a vampire. I already look like Rudolph." As an afterthought she added, "And you're not dead."

"Didn't think that would get past you," he noted good-naturedly, reaching across her to tap the function keys that would save her file and exit the program.

"Nick!"

Unmoved by the protest, he parked the hard drive and switched off the computer. "I'm not allowed to work, so I have to make myself useful somehow."

"By policing my health?" she inquired sharply, but Nick was sure he caught a smile flickering at the corners of her mouth.

"Well, I don't think much of the job *you're* doing at it." Before she could object, he added, "Besides, you're not going to let me go home and play couch potato in that big loft all by myself on Christmas Eve, are you?"

"Not if I can help it," she agreed with a sigh. "I guess we could still go to Schanke's; they should be done with dinner, so you shouldn't have too hard a time avoiding food." This last was given pointed emphasis and accompanied by an impish smile.

Picking up her coat and holding it out, he chuckled, "Well, I won't argue that Myra has nothing on you in that department. But unless you're really attached to the idea, I might have a better one."

"Okaaayy..."

* * *

A short while later, Nat was firmly ensconced on Nick's couch, the thick satin comforter from his bed around her shoulders, the Puffs box in easy reach, and a mug of lemon tea with a generous dollop of honey in her hands. "Nick, this is ridiculous," she told him for the umptieth time, immediately undermining the statement with a short outburst of coughing. "Bleah. 'Scuse me." Now he had punched the remote to ignite the gas fireplace. "Oh, come on, Nick. I took my Vicks like a good little girl. I do *not* need all this."

"Maybe, maybe not. But you're getting it anyway." The twinkle of mischief in his eyes stopped her intended further argument and started her wondering just what he was up to now. Snatching up the small box wrapped in gold paper that she had failed to notice on the coffee table— boy, she was in rare form tonight!— he said, "And you also get this. Merry Christmas, Nat."

"But I can't— I mean, your present is at my place." She did not add that she hadn't even wrapped it yet.

"Well, then, Sidney can guard it for me. I'm just being impatient." His grin did not belong on an adult's face, let alone one that had weathered eight centuries. She hadn't reached for the box, and he took her hand and placed his offering in it, setting her empty mug on the coffee table. "Go on, open it."

"You'd think immortality might teach a person patience," Natalie sniffed, picking meticulously at the ribbon and tape until Nick looked ready to implode. "Oh, all right, I'll stop torturing you." Tearing the paper away in one yank, she opened the box to reveal a delicate gold charm bracelet. "Wow. Pretty." And didn't *that* sound intelligent, she chided herself. "This is really nice, Nick. Thank you."

She opened the little latch and moved to put it on, but Nick took it and did it for her, kneeling by the couch and not relinquishing her hand. "It does need explaining," he told her, turning the slender chain around her wrist until he found a tiny grinning comedy mask. "This, because you taught me how to laugh again when I had forgotten." His voice was very quiet with a near-imperceptible tremor, and with a shock Nat realised it sounded as if he were about to cry. She had never found out whether he could...

"So where's the tragedy to go with it?" she inquired lightly.

He answered with the most absolute seriousness she had ever heard. "You've had enough of those. I won't willingly bring you any more." Turning to the next charm, a miniature skeleton key, he explained, "I've given you the key to my home, my secrets, my life...as I was always too afraid to do with any other human soul. And I'll never regret it. In your hands it becomes the key to unlock my prison."

"Nick..." She found nothing at all to say, eyes fixed on the bits of gold that carried such charged meanings.

Next in line was an old-fashioned soda fountain glass, complete with straw. "The milkshake's pretty self-explanatory."

"And very cute."

A pirate's treasure chest. "Because I can't begin to tell you how precious you are to me."

She didn't even attempt to answer that.

An exquisite little cross, which he held gingerly but without apparent pain. "Did you know I hadn't opened that box in a long, long time before I showed the cross to you? You gave that back to me too."

Somehow Natalie found her voice. "No. You won that battle yourself."

"Maybe. But not until I went into it carrying your favour." An anchor. "Hope. I had to relearn this too, from a crazy young woman who reached out in wonder when she should have run away in fear."

Oh, rats, now *she* was going to cry.

The last charm was a sun with minuscule wavy rays like the one that hung on his kitchen wall. "This is where I believe you will lead me. This is the light you brought into my world, the brightest I had seen in 560 years— and even then I caught only a flicker."

Some analytical part of Natalie's mind never went off-duty, and near-automatic subtraction supplied her with 1430. He couldn't mean Joan, that was ludicrous! That couldn't be the comparison he was making.

"I wasn't ready for what she tried to teach me." His voice was faltering again. "And she had no time to make me see it; she had to go fight for her people." Nick clasped her hand tightly in both his own. "I never expected you to come along and fight for *me*. And I can't understand why you have also been paid in pain."

"Nick, you're not making any sense."

He swallowed hard. "This past year has been so cruel to you; sometimes I wanted so much to just wrap you up in silk and hide you away where nothing could ever hurt you again. But I can't do that, and the world keeps taking pieces out of you."

"Nick, I owe you my life several times over," she reminded him. "What more could I possibly ask?"

He shook his head. "I don't know; you never do. Just answer me this, Nat: when was the last time you really felt safe?"

As soon as the question was asked, she knew she didn't have an answer; but she hesitated anyway. Finally she said, "This isn't a safe world, Nick. You should know that better than anyone."

"Yes, I do. I also know that I've made it a more dangerous one for you."

"Oh, come on, Nick!" she objected sharply. "It is *not* your fault that Laura Neal ran me off the road, or that I picked the wrong wacko to date or the wrong time to show up at the precinct..."

"And who put you in the line of Chinese Mafia fire?" he interrupted. "Who provided a temptation no one should face, and made you lose Richard twice?" He looked away for a second, then met her eyes again. "And who threatened you that night at the Raven, when you came to help?"

"Nick, that—"

"Oh, I know, I know. I acknowledged. I apologized. You forgave me before I even asked; but that doesn't undo what's already done. I saw the bruises you tried to hide from me, Nat." He turned her hand over, traced on the inside of her wrist the marks she had worn a few months before from his crushing grip. "But I didn't have to see them. I knew I hurt you, because I *intended* to."

Nat shook her head, insisting, "That doesn't matter now."

"Yes, it does. No, hear me out," he requested when she drew breath to disagree. "I knew you would argue this, but it isn't the point. The point is, peace on earth and good will toward men are out of my league. But if you'll accept it, for this evening I can manage peace within these walls and nothing but good will toward you."

There was silence for a long moment, broken by a brain-rattling sneeze that set them both laughing, which in turn prompted another spurt of coughs. "Well, if you think you can manage the peace part with *that* going on," Natalie quipped when she had regained her breath.

"Well, Doctor," Nick returned, making sure the comforter was wrapped securely around her, "my recommendation is that the patient sit back, enjoy the movie, and allow herself to be waited on hand and foot, starting with a fresh cup of tea."

"Okay, okay, you win," she chuckled. "So what's playing? I assume we're not raiding the Universal classic monsters vault tonight."

A brief discussion, and they settled on the original *Miracle on 34th Street*, with the "patient" noting, "Every time this movie came around when I was a kid, Mom always said *her* Natalie was cuter. Funny, since Dad said that's kind of where they got my name in the first place. According to him, they were just starting to discuss names when *West Side Story* came out, and they both thought the movie was much

too sad but the star had a pretty name." Nodding toward the child on the screen, she added, "Of course, she was a little taller in that."

Nick must have caught the slight catch in her voice, for he told her, "You're not required to stop missing them, Nat, no matter how many years go by. Believe me, I know."

"Yeah."

While Nick fiddled in the kitchen at the mostly unfamiliar task of making tea, Natalie followed "doctor's orders" and settled into the most comfortable spot on the couch and the ever-magical tale of a Kris Kringle who was real in all the ways that mattered, real enough to make a precociously serious, sceptical little girl believe in miracles.

She had to admit she was glad now that she had failed to make Nick stop babying her; the morgue's typical coolness hadn't been particularly welcome this frigid week, but now she felt properly thawed out for a change. Okay, maybe she could let go of the restless drive to *do* things and let Nick spoil her to his heart's content, at least for a little while.

She'd found this very sweet notion of creating a pocket of security amusing at first, a gift she didn't really need. Now that it was taking shape around her, though, it was clear that Nick was right: she couldn't recall the last time the demons of the world had seemed so far away, the last time she'd sat down to relax without feeling she ought to be doing something else. As Nick said, the last time she'd really felt safe.

When he returned, she accepted the refill gratefully. "I have to warn you, this is going to make your Christmas present from me look pretty wimpy. Just one more thing to make it complete."

"What's that?" he asked, looking around the room to see what gap might have been left.

"Hey, I can't sit still if I don't give you *something*! A hug will do for now."

He grinned. "I'll accept that. But don't you *dare* get up."

"Okay, okay." Expecting the usual fleeting contact before he put her back at arm's length, she was surprised to find herself held almost as tightly as when the Roger nightmare had ended, when he had been so terrified he would arrive too late and so nearly right. Cool fingers twined in her hair, and it occurred to her that Nick had used the quilt and the tea and the cheery fire to wrap her in a warmth he could not himself supply. But someday, she swore to herself anew, he would have it again. "Um, Nick, I *really* hate to do this," she said a moment later, "but you'd better let go because I'm going to sneeze again."

"And we're missing the movie," he added, handing her a tissue and holding her tea until she finished.

* * *

Having been informed that he was an excellent backrest and thus remained where he was, Nick steeled himself for a string of artfully barbed comments when the elevator door slid aside to reveal Janette, her usual elegant appearance topped off with a sprig of mistletoe perched jauntily in her upswept hair. He was about to say something, but she put a gloved finger to lips pursed in silent amusement and nodded toward Natalie.

Absorbed in the film, he had no idea when she had fallen asleep. And she wasn't just dozing; she was worry-be-damned, visions-of-sugarplums, all-but-dead-weight *out*. He answered Janette's expression with a grin of his own, shrugging and then pointing to the TV remote in a wordless request to shut it off. While she did so, he carefully shifted Nat's head from his shoulder and settled her on the couch, glad she had at least chosen to wear comfortable sweats to the near-deserted coroner's office today.

Janette followed him upstairs so their conversation would not disturb her, saying as soon as the door was shut, "And I expected you to be all alone, moping as usual." Wrinkling her nose, she added, "She smells of medicine. Does she doctor the living too?"

"Just me, usually." It was lightly spoken, but he knew she sensed his thoughts too well to miss the implicit dare to tell him he was not included among the living. "She has a cold, and she's been working too hard as usual. I guess it caught up with her."

"Hmm. I would have thought she was made of sterner stuff."

"I wouldn't advise you to test that," Nick returned.

Clucking her tongue, Janette chided, "When will you run out of pedestals, *mon amour*? She's only a human woman—and a foolhardy, stubborn, unpredictable one at that."

Something in her tone, or perhaps in the mind behind it, got Nick's attention. "You really respect her, don't you?"

That earned a glare, and she seemed about to snap at him, then changed her mind. "I didn't come here to argue with you, Nicholas. It's Christmas, and the *idea* was good cheer. But it would do you both an injustice to expect things of her that she cannot give, cannot be. I don't like seeing you repeat your mistakes."

"I'm not going to," he assured her positively. "Not that one. Not ever again."

She gave him a long, measuring look. "No, perhaps not." Then her teasing manner returned, and she gave him a melodramatic pout, conspicuously adjusting the mistletoe in her hair. "Why is she here, anyway? Shouldn't she be spending Christmas with her family like a normal mortal?"

"They don't all have that option, Janette," he reminded her quietly. "She used to do Christmas with her brother. This year his wife went to her parents' in Windsor; Nat was invited but she said she felt like an interloper."

The pout deepened. "Isn't she?"

"Come on, Janette, was I supposed to let her barricade herself in her damn lab?" he asked, exasperated. "I didn't even know you were going to come over!"

"Was I supposed to let you barricade yourself in your precious concrete box?" Janette shot back. "And by the way, Nicky, must I remind you it's bad luck to defy tradition concerning things like mistletoe?"

For a moment Nick just stared at her. Finally they both laughed, and he told her, "It's a good thing we can't get whiplash, because the way you change subjects I'd be in serious trouble." Pulling her close to fulfil the request, he added, "But it's worth it to hear you laugh."

"Worth looking like a fool? But you do it so well..."

Seven hundred sixty-five years, and she had lost not an ounce of her power to make his head spin. In these moments, he could not deny that truth: a part of him would always belong to her, would answer her call even if—when!—he found his miracle and left the darkness behind forever. He wasn't sure whether or not he hoped she knew that.

At last breaking the kiss, she slanted coquette's eyes up at him, and as ever he wished that he could erase the sorrow she could never entirely mask in their blue depths. "Well, obviously I had no need to worry about you, so I think I will seek out a more festive atmosphere. *Joyeux Noël*, Nicholas."

"Janette, wait." She stopped at the door and turned to face him, but he wasn't sure what he wanted to say. "I didn't mean to...if you want I can..."

She smiled, shaking her head. "No. I understand what you have tried to do here, the illusion you have created. There was a time when you gave such gifts to me. It's a little magic, I think; don't break it by leaving her alone. There's too little magic in the world already."

And then she was gone, leaving Nick completely at a loss. Would she never cease to surprise him? "Probably not," he answered himself. He did not delude himself that it was ever likely to happen again; Janette, too, had given a Christmas gift tonight, one he knew had cost much more than his. He would have to find a way to let her know it was appreciated, without offending her by actually mentioning it. Briefly he wondered if he'd ever fathom *that* particular quirk...

Soundlessly he padded downstairs, toward the refrigerator and the meal he had put off until Natalie could not observe it. It wouldn't have been the first time she'd seen him drink his dinner, but tonight he had avoided the graphic reminder of what he was.

Nick glanced at her as he passed the couch, then stopped short. She hadn't moved an inch, still sound asleep as any carefree child, and covered snugly by the comforter exactly as he had left her.

But tucked into her wayward curls was a little sprig of mistletoe. "Oh, Janette," he murmured, too softly for Nat to hear even if she had been awake.

* * *

FOREVER

Halfway across town, Janette sat in her darkened office at the Raven, staring at the untouched glass before her, the atmosphere anything but festive. She did not have to actively reach out to touch Nick's mind when a rush of tenderness flooded from him, spilling along their bond to fill a little of the empty space inside her. It did not matter, she tried to tell herself, that it welled up for another, evoked by the innocence that he so treasured and that she had lost long before his birth. This was what made him Nicholas, what made her incapable of counting any debt against him, what he alone of all their kind had kept alive inside him no matter how the shadows sought to smother it. It was enough, she tried to tell herself, to drink of the warm overflow; there was no need to envy Natalie her place as its focus. It was only because he couldn't truly protect the frail mortal woman, not from illness or tragedy or time; while she herself needed no such protection.

She wasn't fooling herself for an instant, but she would face the sun before admitting it. "*Soyez heureux*, Nicholas," she said to the air, raising her glass. "Be happy." Downing the wine-laced blood in a few gulps, she did not seek Nick's thoughts more closely, unaware that her assumption was quite mistaken.

That her wish was granted.

TARA 74

Bring Me Home Tonight

By Tanya Beaty

KARA WAS BEING followed.

She *knew*. Walking down the street, hearing the sound of the hem of her overcoat swishing against her jeans like some great bat's wingbeats, she felt the hair on the back of her neck prickle and a shiver dance between her shoulder blades. Staring at her gloved, numb hands, she cleared her mind. Something was wrong. Something was urging her to...run. To be afraid.

Kara had stopped being afraid long ago.

She felt some strange thing, a darkness unfamiliar to her, pressing against the back of her mind, and she *knew*.

She didn't run. She didn't scream. She didn't even stick to the lighted areas in the street, or start making a path to the beckoning lights of the still-open shops farther up the street. Not in this part of town. In danger, all else seemed innocent—but this was the bad part of Toronto, the part where the cops didn't leave their cars without their guns handy and the people didn't leave their houses after dark. No, Kara didn't do anything except hunch further down into her overcoat, just like any other person walking down a street on a cold night, and thought furiously.

Up ahead, an intersection. If she turned right, she would be home in fifteen minutes. Safe in the cramped, smelly confines of her small and dirty apartment. If she turned left, a 7-11 five minutes away, where she could call a cop to help her. He'd come out, look around, find nothing. Offer to escort her home, which she'd take. In the car, he would mutter about the bad side of town, and how was a nice girl living there. Why don't you move out? he'd ask. And she would turn her face to the window and watch the night moving past.

When she got to the intersection, she turned right.

* * *

One of the shadows disengaged itself from the wall and stepped after the woman, forming into the shape of a man in a black overcoat. Smiling to himself, he quickened his pace, careful to step around the pools of light thrown by the lampposts. Avoiding a large pile of rotting trash sprawled over the snow on the sidewalk, however, he stepped briefly into one of the light spots. The pale glow glinted off his shock of white-blond hair, giving him a golden halo.

He smiled in the darkness. He didn't make kills often any more, not in this day and age. It was too easy for the police to realize someone was missing. It was no longer easy to hide bodies. And so he kept from making more than random kills in order to keep from drawing attention to himself and his kind—and to keep the Enforcers from coming after him.

Sometimes, though, when an ignorant mortal—such as this one—blundered out onto the street at night, alone, they would find more than the cool light of the moon. Beyond the shadows, deep in the dark, Lacroix was waiting.

* * *

Kara knew he was still there; knew that he was closer. She could almost feel something hovering over her back, waiting for her to run. Smiling at her, daring her to run.

To act like prey.

She glanced down at her hands while she walked. They were steady. She sighed. She had faced the horrors of life before—she was no naive child. Whatever happened—happened. Afterwards—if there was an afterwards; that was always debatable in this neighbourhood—she would take a shower in her grimy stall, a nice warm shower. Wash herself thoroughly, climb into bed—

She stopped. Bed. Her apartment—her *home*— No. Whatever was going to happen, Kara wanted it to happen here. Now. On this street, outside of her haven. She wasn't going to let this person into her home; she wasn't going to let him invade her life. Not the life she had fought so hard to have after everything else was taken away; not the existence she'd managed to eke out for herself here, far away from anything known. For over a year she'd lived in that small, dank apartment, hoping the roof wouldn't cave in with each rainfall and that the rotting smell wafting under the neighbour's door wasn't what—who—she thought it was—but the place was *hers*. Her apartment, her little niche in life, no matter how much it stank. And she wasn't going to let anyone invade it. She wouldn't be driven out this time.

Kara squared her shoulders. She wouldn't let anyone take her home away from her again.

* * *

Lacroix smiled when he saw her stop, then nearly laughed aloud when she turned and seemed to wait for him. He was amused. Did she really think she could take him on? Did she really think her puny mortal strength was any match for his? Did she really think she would be the victor?

He glided out of the shadows, closer to her, allowing her to see him drift suddenly from the darkness, the shadows clinging to his form like old friends. He smiled at her.

But other than a slight widening of her eyes, she stood firm.

"What are you going to do to me?" Her voice was calm, soft.

"Do?" One dark eyebrow rose slowly. "What am I going to do to you?"

Suddenly, he wasn't standing five feet away from her any more. Suddenly, he was *there*, and he smiled slightly at the almost unnoticeable intake of her breath as he appeared in front of her, close to her. Lacroix laughed inside. He was so close he could reach out now and rip her throat open, giving her a permanent, horrible smile frozen in the rictus of death.

Circling slowly around her, he moved, stopping behind her, so close that he could blow on her hair. She hadn't turned her head to follow his progress, but had stared straight ahead. Her shoulders stiffened slightly when he paused behind her, and he smiled. Bending slightly, he whispered, "What *am* I going to do to you?" He was close enough to nuzzle her earlobe. "Ah, that's the question." His hot breath raked across her ear as he hovered over the smooth, pale curve of her cheek.

Slowly, she turned and looked at him with a level gaze. "That's what I asked you," she said softly.

He reared back quickly. He hadn't expected this...this serenity. Pacing around her, he stopped, facing her, an arm's length away. Her eyes had followed him as he moved, and her heartbeat was loud and sure in his head.

"Why didn't you run?"

She kept her eyes on him. "Would that have helped?"

He smiled cruelly. "No."

"So why bother?"

He kept the surprise from his face with effort. "To save yourself, of course."

She looked away. "It was already too late."

Lacroix laughed out loud. "That it was. From the moment I first saw you walking alone." He snorted. "No lover to protect you? All alone?"

She glanced up at him, and some emotion—sorrow? fear?—flashed quickly, brightly, in her eyes. "No lover. No one. I'm all alone."

"So no one will miss you when you're gone."

"Does that mean you're going to kill me?" she asked calmly.

Lacroix pretended to consider, then smiled at her gently. "Yes, I do believe I will."

"No."

The vampire was amused. "You have some objections? Would you care to try and stop me?"

"You misunderstand me." She shook her head, her short brown hair falling over her face. "No one will miss me when I'm gone."

Lacroix laughed again, a short bark of surprise at her. What a curious mortal! He ignored the utter absurdity of the situation—of the feeling of unreality, at prey that didn't run. It was a nice change, he thought, as he watched her calm face. He cocked his head and listened to her heartbeat—strong, sure, mortal—and felt his mouth flood with saliva.

Then, suddenly, he was beside her, his hand gripping her arm, the other behind her neck. He pulled her with him, heading deeper into the shadows—into an alley which he could faintly see with his enhanced eyesight. She came with him docilely, unprotesting. Anyone watching would have thought they were long-lost lovers.

Anyone watching would have been wrong.

The vampire pulled her into the alleyway, stealing her from the light of the moon outside. Smiling, he watched as her pale form was swallowed by the shadows deep inside. Here were the things that hid from the light. Here lived the creatures of the night.

He turned to the quiet mortal.

Suddenly, the darkness within him erupted, and he snarled, fangs thrusting from his mouth and eyes glowing lambent green. He turned to the mortal woman, hissing.

She barely flinched. "Are you a vampire?"

He smiled, fangs glinting coldly in the darkness. "Yesssss...."

"Are you going to make me one too?"

Lacroix checked himself. "Do you want to?" Not that he would...but a new convert brought power to him. "Do you want eternal life?" He stared at her, deep into her eyes. Her heartbeat pounded loudly in his mind. "Do you want to live forever?"

She shook her head slowly, staring at him, yet looking deep inside of herself. "No." She shook her head harder. "No, not really. I'd much rather have...peace."

"Then you shall." He smiled, a horrifying expression that twisted lips and exposed fangs to their roots. "You shall have peace for eternity, rotting in your grave—"

He pulled her to him with one arm, holding her body against his tightly. He needn't have bothered. She stumbled into his arms, then stiffened when he sank his fangs into her throat, deep into the carotid artery. He was fast, lunging and quickly burying his fangs, feeling the blood well up, nearly crying out joyously as the first explosion of blood filled his mouth. The mortal gasped and nearly fell, but he cupped the back of her head with his other hand and supported her, sensual lips and tongue working hot on her neck in a macabre parody of sex. She shuddered, clutching at the lapels of his coat tightly, burying her hands in the material as spasms ripped through her body. He dug his fangs further into her throat, pulling down slightly, greedily widening the gaps through which the thick, bright red liquid flowed, feeling it spurt into his mouth, a fatal echo to her heartbeats. Keeping time with her life. She

made little noises, wet, choking noises, as his tongue suckled greedily at her neck, his lips locked on her rapidly cooling skin. Beads of blood escaped to run down her shoulders into her coat, down her arm, to drop to the snow below like red rain.

Her hands suddenly loosened their grip and fell, and she sagged limply against him.

Lacroix pulled back and looked at her through heavy-lidded eyes, feeling the warmth of her blood dribble down his chin. A similar heat was spreading through his body, the only body heat he could ever share. Her heartbeat pounded loudly in his ears—she was alive, but she was fading fast. He smiled at her as she stared at him, trying to concentrate, to focus, as her body began to shut down. Her eyes wobbled. Lacroix knelt down onto the dark-spotted snow, setting her down in an oddly gentle way, one hand supporting her back as the other hand grasped her face. He wanted her to look at him. He forced her to face him, used his mind to force her dilating pupils to contract and focus on him. When he knew she saw him as best as she could, he licked the blood from his lips and smiled sardonically. "Thank you."

She smiled groggily. "You're welcome," she said softly.

Lacroix nearly dropped her onto the snow. Wha—? "Why are you smiling?" he whispered. When she remained silent, lolling in his arms as her life spilled onto his hands, he shook her and grabbed her face cruelly. There was something to this mortal—some sort of utter peace inside—that filled him with a sense of urgency. What made her different? What was her power? He bent low over her. "Why are you smiling?" he demanded harshly.

She breathed slowly through her open mouth, the faint starlight from high above the darkness glistening off the blood still oozing from her throat. She coughed, and a spurt of deep red washed over her white skin, bathing her chest in blood. "My friend," she coughed, each movement making a wet, sickening sound, "I'm not really sure... what AIDS will do...to *your* kind, but I thank you for saving me from...the effects to my kind. I've given you a meal...hopefully saved some other poor innocent—you've given me the greatest of all gifts." She sighed. "You've taken away my suffering...you've given me peace..."

Her eyes suddenly widened, as if she saw something that awed her. Lacroix nearly looked back—but then her cold blue lips twisted into a smile of such beauty, such peace, that Lacroix watched her with horror, and...shame. Her body stiffened and shuddered, and only his hearing detected the soft words she breathed.

"The Light—"

Then, suddenly, she went limp as warm clay and slipped through Lacroix's stiff fingers to fall with a muffled thud on the defiled purity of the snow.

The vampire stared dully down at the woman's body. *No.* He shook his head. "NO!" Throwing his head back, he screamed into the dark sky, shouting into the unforgiving face of the moon, shattering the chill silence of the night. "NOOO!!!" He panted heavily and looked down at his hands, his eyesight wavering over the delicate, lacy trail of blood staining his fingers down to his arms. He wavered dizzily, feeling anger rising up to consume him in black waves. His eyes danced over the alley, searching for a target. Her pale form danced before his eyes, mocking him. Viciously, he turned on the mortal's body, ripping the cooling flesh into shreds with his bare hands, glorifying in the violence, intending to scatter the pieces in a gory trail across the city.

And yet, even as he tore her apart, Lacroix was haunted by the memory of her peaceful smile as she died.

Dark Angel
by Sandra Alexis Chisholm

Not perfect, nay, but full of tender wants
No angel, but a dearer being, all dipt
In angel instincts, breathing Paradise.

- Alfred, Lord Tennyson

TEN TIMES THE CLOCK chimes drifted down towards the river. Ten times she found herself gazing into its silken mirror. The reflection of the moon danced in reckless enby, like some dark angel, upon the shifting water. The chestnut hair that framed her face fell forward from the wind, her only company as she walked silently on. Ten times she crossed the once bustling bridge in darkness, its girded heights swaying reluctantly overhead. Ten times she leaned on its rails, forcing back the tears that yearned to meet the blackened waters below. Throwing back her head, Etain resolved to end these endless evening walks; deciding that this time would be the last. In the rushing of the wind, a woman's frantic scream ripped through the fabric of the night. Etain never heard it.

Cold steel beneath her feet, Etain climbed the last step towards the summit of the bridge. Shadows in familiar faces faded into the grey and darkened waters before they dimmed into blackness, beckoning her hack to another time, another life. Whitecaps crashed upon the city walls, wind rippled through waiting sails on harboured ships, and wings in desolation beat themselves in wistful rhythms of the night. Words echoed like distant drums beating in her ears; neither wind nor rain could drown the voice inside her head. With the early light not yet come, life slipped away, as empty and hollow as this silent world upon her muted heart. Her tears, her fragile faith, sustained no more of life in her than in her dying dreams.

Death was all that remained. The unwelcome rain dampened all her senses: more than once, her footing unsure, in weakness she collapsed. She could no longer bear the weight of the unseen stranger, she could no longer dance to illusions' silent music. Time waits for no one, she thought; or did it? Well, tonight it would wait for her. Etain stared into the distance. Standing still above the ground, her world hung deadened by the breeze and her future slipped beyond the breach, its burden heavy and unyielding. Leaning over the rail, she ripped the silver chain from off her neck, holding it high into the night in silent invitation to her absent angel of mercy. All she could feel was the cool silver burning into her hand. All she could see was the blackness of the night. She'd long since lost the strength to fight her visions, and still, the voice raged in her mind:

...I have forsaken you, for you have sheltered mine enemy. Do not call on me again, for I can no longer hear your cries. Seek not salvation, for you are already dead to me. As you have left me, so are you, forever alone.

What have I done? What crime so hideous, so evil, damns my soul to nothingness? Her disbelief descended into agony. Never to be forgiven. But why should she be? She could feel the shame, the guilt, the deep unending suffering of a cast-away. Somewhere, love freely given had been abandoned, discarded like so much wasted time. The breaking mist sank into the murky depths as morning light threatened to creep out of its swept and shattered grave. Look to the stars, someone whispered in a memory. "To find the light?" No, the light held no answers for her now. Find the dark, find relief, find release. "Take this dream of light away. I can wait no longer. This time, I will not falter." To live without love, to live without God, was not to live at all. What is life, she thought, but the heart in mortal conflict with the soul; love and faith eternal enemies? That was no life at all. And neither was this: haunted by visions of a life she had never known; indeed, this was no life at all. Arms upraised, her eyes upon the water, her choice was made. The sunlight burned in her memory as the silent mirror closed in upon her mind. She raised her eyes toward the darkened heavens and in moonlight, dropped the pendant from outstretched hands to the water below. The symbol of her love descended into darkness. She would not be far behind.

* * *

The phone rang four times before Nick's machine picked up. He was almost out the door when a voice came from the speaker:

"Hey, Knight. You're gonna love this one. Crowd control problem down by the old River Bridge. Seems there's this babe standing on the railing, and everybody's making book on when she's gonna jump. Don't you just hate it when the moon is full? Meet ya down there. Hasta la bye-bye."

Nick was moving before Schanke put down the phone.

The Cadillac glistened as Nick sped down mid-town streets. He knew he had to take the car; he also knew that time wouldn't wait for him, not now. Time, once an unseen friend, had throughout the centuries, become his enemy. The driving rain might stop traffic for a while, but it wouldn't stop the people at the bridge, like vampyres, gathering for the kill. The distinctions between his kind and humanity, had once been crystal clear; tonight, they mixed and blurred like blood and wine in coloured glass. What kind of people enjoyed this sort of thing? What twisted souls savoured the suffering of others as sport? Nick winced; this wasn't the first time he watched a hungered crowd feed on the torment of others. Sometimes he wondered if humanity was truly the cure he sought: so much hidden in their eyes, so much deep within their souls; sometimes he wondered if mortals were any different at all. His mind drifted back to the time he had spent in England during the Reformation. The war between the Catholics and the Anglicans was brutal: they killed each other over what seemed to him, trite liturgical differences. Could faith in God drive man to break the very laws he claimed to defend? Yes, he's seen it before. These were the soldiers in an army of reckless fools. Once, he had fought in God's army, but that was long ago. Then, at least, he and the other Crusaders were killing heathens; this time, Christians were slaughtering one another. Nick remembered the fires that, in another time, in another falling rain, steadily smouldered throwing unwilling flames into the skies over Smithfield.

* * *

The vampyres waited until the lighting of the fires to feed upon the staked and steadfast martyrs. The damp hay burned slowly, its smoke a protective mist that cloaked them from prying eyes. How many times had they gorged themselves on the feast of man's self-inflicted atrocities? Nick could not remember. If fear was the mother of violence, then surely she loved her children of the night. The exquisite irony of feeding on these devout heretics was not lost on Lacroix; for him it made the killing

that much sweeter. He relished his role as the angel of death: perhaps it was Lacroix's zeal that pushed Nicholas into the self-imposed isolation that so angered his companions. Perhaps Nicholas' practicality, his rationalization of the kill resulted from his fear of one day seeing himself in the silent mirror that was Lacroix. Yet how much did it matter when the thirst called instinct into action? The killing was a necessary evil, and one that never let him forget what he truly was.

Nicholas weaved through the mist as he flew over the condemned feast before him. The heat was tolerable, the fire was another matter. Nature had scarcely fashioned him for a heroic role, yet, for those who suffered the flames in the spiritual agony of persecution, Nicholas might have seemed the simple and perennial messenger of grace. His swift justice would temper this festival of intolerance; even he could bring them easier deaths than what awaited them in the flames. Staying close to the far end of the field, the dark angel brought their horror to a quick close. Desire fulfilled, he remembered he was not alone. Sated, he watched in morbid fascination as the others mocked their prey; rejoicing in the terror, feeding more on the fear than on blood. Truly, he belonged no more with his own kind than with these poor mortals. Scanning the field once more before leaving, one familiar face met him with a fevered gaze. Only slightly singed, fighting the heat to stay awake, she turned her eyes toward heaven. In anger, Nicholas turned away from the girl. As he turned, he could see Lacroix's blood-stained face laughing at him.

"Leaving the festivities so soon, my boy? How many times must I tell you, Nicholas, it's very rude not to clean your plate." Lacroix's bloodlust turned itself in anticipation to the young girl. Nicholas changed his mind and stepped between them.

"She's mine, Lacroix."

"Get on with it then, Nicholas. Take her, now."

Nicholas recoiled from the flames that danced about the dying girl. When he was sure that Lacroix had returned to the hunt, Nicholas ended his feigned attack. Frightened and confused, the girl remained still; her eyes still on the mid-night sky.

"Look to the stars, if you must. Perhaps your God will send you an angel." Nicholas wrapped his arms around her, rising through the night and out of danger before Elaine could catch her breath.

Setting her down in a old nearby house, he gazed at Elaine: her face blackened, her eyes red and full of tears, Nicholas still saw the strong, beautiful girl that confronted him so boldly on their first meeting. Brushing back her dark, brown hair, he hushed her whispering sobs with a kiss.

"Why did you not leave me to die?"

His anger rose like burgeoning flame.

"What right did you have to take me from death's arms? Do you know what you have done?" No longer crying, Elaine's wrath matched the fire in his eyes.

"What right? Did you want to die? Did you want to burn for your precious faith? God wouldn't save you, but I did. Should I have left you for the flames, or perhaps for the others like myself to feed upon? Don't you know what I can do?"

Softly, but with conviction, Elaine spoke her words like a prayer.

"Nicholas, you should have let me die."

He forgot himself. He forgot the blood, still fresh on his lips. His hand slipped around her delicate neck, shaking her as her eyes widened in disbelief. Gold eyes flashed as the fury overtook him.

"You weren't so keen to die that night in the cellar when I found you, hiding in the corner, like so many wounded mice. I could have taken you then, but instead, I let you live. And what do you do with my gift of life? You throw it away on the trinkets of a petty belief. You ungrateful fool, you should hold your life as dear as you do your pathetic little cross. I will take you now, if death is what you seek."

Unmoved by his visage, Elaine raised her hand to his cheek. She didn't notice the blood, not quite dried, upon his face. Crying while she spoke, she stared into his face with forgiving eyes.

"I desire not death. I am not so different from you, Nicholas. I spent my life in search of meaning, in search of love. I found these things in God. I lay down my life for him because he offers me love and life eternal in his kingdom of glory."

Nicholas loosened his grip from her throat. Taking his hand in hers, she raised it to her lips, and laid upon it a kiss so soft, he could no longer feed his hungry rage.

"What would you do, Nicholas, to feel that kind of love? What would you give to be loved in return? If you risked the fire to save a fool such as I, how much farther would you risk yourself to save that which you truly loved?"

Her words echoed hidden voices deep within his mind: his pain mirrored in the grey blush of her eyes. Leaving her in silence, he burst through the cottage door and out into the night.

* * *

Nick pulled the car up to the curb just as the bridge came into sight. Stepping out onto the slick street, he closed the door behind him. He could still feel Elaine's kiss on his hand, he could still hear her words echo in his mind. He looked up and saw the dark-haired woman standing on the summit of the bridge.

The shaded glow of a curious sky lit the fluttering necklace as it fell toward the excited mob below. Above, Etain stared into the night and cried. No one could hear her, no one could see her hands as they loosened their tenuous grip on the rails. No one could see the darkness surround her in its impassioned arms. No one but Nick.

After so many years, how could one memory, one very painful memory, live so vividly in his weary mind? Turning away, he remembered the girl from the fire, he remembered her courage: what he wanted to forget, was how easily she had thrown her life away, and how easily she had turned away from him. His memory spilled out on the floor of belief, and in that one moment-one woman in sight, another long since gone-he closed his mind and gave himself over to the past.

* * *

Nicholas had returned to the cottage, only to find Elaine scribbling on half-burnt parchment, waiting for his return. All traces of the fire were gone now; she appeared transformed somehow, transfixed, beautified. In her eyes he found contentment, and he wasn't sure if it came from her, or from within himself.

Elaine stood and met the hidden power of his eyes with a shrouded strength of her own. Nicholas sensed a change, and for a brief moment, the weary night seemed that if might give way. She made no effort to draw back as he slowly and deliberately circled the room.

"You appear to have recovered. Tell me, Elaine; is God still whispering in your ear? You have seen the face of evil and survived. What does he tell you now?" His words were not as cruel as he had intended them. The expression on her face revealed no fear, no trepidation. Like an angel standing in the sun, she remained bathed in the warm, inviting majesty of her faith.

"He tells me," Elaine whispered in mocking jest, "that ingratitude is a sin. Not wanting to be sinful, I say 'Thank you' to my saviour. Now, Nicholas, what does he tell you?"

For a moment, he thought she was trying to be hurtful. Perhaps it was only her honesty that stung him; yes, she was incapable of that kind of vengeful hate. And so he let her see the pain that he kept prisoner, the agony that he kept safely locked away from the rest of the world.

"He tells me nothing I do not already know. Salvation is beyond me now; my sins are beyond his forgiveness." The words cut deeper that any weapon. As life destroys life, so he had wrung down hard justice upon himself. Once he lived out his days trying to tell right from wrong. Once he lived in an age when honour meant much more to a man than life. His had been a sturdy ship, but when beset by a tempest, it failed to survive the shifting waters of life's cruel seas. Sadly, where he dreamed to be, he knew he could never go. Nicholas tasted the bitter harvest reaped by weakness, by his frail humanity. Overcome with resignation, he drew his breath in the timeless sigh of sad acceptance.

Elaine closed watchful eyes and wept.

"Why Nicholas, open your eyes and witness your own rebirth. No sin is too great that God may not forgive. You redeem yourself in your humility. Look to the light, and you will see you have a place in his kingdom."

For a moment, he stood motionless. His hopes, his dreams, slipped away in the perfect humility of self-knowledge, and like tears fell on empty ground.

"Don't talk to me of light; there are no answers for me there. You know what I am, you know what I have done, how can you talk to me of forgiveness? I could easily kill you now. How easily will I find forgiveness then?"

"I will forgive you, Nicholas." Elaine walked slowly, but deliberately into his arms.

"There is only one way to lead you to God now. Take my hand. God will forgive us both."

"What are you saying?" Nicholas held her at arms length.

"If I must say it, I will. I am not afraid. Take me, Nicholas. Make me what you are; I give myself to you willingly."

Gently reaching out to her, his fingers drifted down her arm, and found her open hand. How simple all this seemed; to her, this was a gift of honesty, of sacrifice. Though freely given, he knew it was her innocence, and her ignorant faith that had led her this far.

"Are you so eager to sacrifice yourself? Death is eternal. Don't be so anxious to meet him face to face. It's not a sight for eyes as pretty as yours."

"Death may be eternal, Nicholas, but I know two things that are also eternal. The first is God, the second, is you. You took me from my eternal death in God, so you must bring me to eternity with you. As you go, so will I. Make me one of your kind."

Her words struck him like fire. What kind of game was this? He could barely believe that this was the same girl that clung so devoutly to the martyr's stake.

"The heat has made you mad. Do you really want to be like me? Can you imagine what it's like; no, I don't think you can." Nicholas searched her eyes, hoping to find fear, hoping that something would change her mind.

"You know nothing of my kind. First, they would mock you, then toy with you, and then they would rip you to pieces. Even vampyres can be killed, if you know the proper way."

"Perhaps. But I know God will protect me, as he will you, Nicholas. If I can bring you, and perhaps the others back to his fold, wouldn't that be worth my life? I once asked you what you would risk to save that which you truly loved. Love you not your soul? To save it, I would risk my life. What is it worth to you, Nicholas; what will you risk to save yourself?"

He tried to turn away, but she held him fast. He could see heaven in her eyes; waiting for her, perhaps waiting for him.

"I cannot believe you truly know what you ask of me, but I have not the power to resist you. I will come back tomorrow night. Do not be here, unless you still want this." Nicholas started for the door.

"I will not be able to turn away from you again, Elaine." She nodded, and watched him as he turned to leave. Falling to her knees, she prayed to her God for strength and courage that she might face her fears in victory. Surely, the hand of Providence had guided her this far; surely this is what she was born for. She thought she heard Nicholas return, but it was only the wind through the broken shutters. It called to her, whispering her name and hushing the night into quiet submission. Louder and louder it grew, until the voice raged like fire in her body, blazing like thunder in her mind.

"No, please, have mercy," she cried. Throwing her hands up to cover her ears, she pleaded with the voice.

"God, do not forsake me. What have I done?"

Nicholas believed in nothing. Still, the thought of Elaine fighting beside him, fighting the evil that chained him to this lifeless eternity, that chained him to Lacroix, burned in his mind and set his hopes aflame. How easily he had been seduced, he later thought. He had known it was nothing but lies. He knew it when, the next evening he came for her, and she was gone. Only a note, written in a solemn hand, was left to mark her leaving:

...In my mind I have heard the mighty voice of God. I have crossed the boundaries of salvation, and am like you, forever lost. I cannot live knowing God has forsaken me. I cannot live with the knowledge that you were right. Some sins, like betrayal, are unforgivable. Forget my cruel words; they are as useless as my life. Tonight, I will meet your friend death in a sea of blackness. Farewell, Nicholas. Pray for me, if you can.

Elaine of Guilford

* * *

He reached the city bridge in time to watch her fall. He hated her for the fleeting taste of freedom that she offered. Revenge would nurse his wounds, would give him back the sharpness that her forgiving eyes had dulled. Still, he could have saved her: instead he turned away, listening to the music of the water that almost disguised the terror of her final scream.

This time he would not, he must not, turn away again.

Etain watched as her medallion fell deep into the darkness of the night. It was her turn now. The wind defied her; she couldn't hear the distance closing in. Knowing she was no longer on the bridge, she braced herself for swift death to take her in his arms of ice. She felt the sudden shock of stillness: was this all death could bring her, was death no more than quiet oblivion? She could feel his arms around her, she could feel the sharp metal in his hand as he carried her away. Firm ground under her feet, the bridge no longer visible; her confusion, once despairing, was now tempered with desolate frustration. Nick lowered her to the broken slate roof of an abandoned city building.

"What's happening? Where am I?" Etain looked up at daring blue eyes and sensed the sadness with which they watched her bewilderment. Closing her eyes as if in prayer, she tried in vain to summon the frantic angels and seductive demons that possessed her troubled visions. Suddenly, without warning, she struggled out of his arms and onto her feet, anger strengthening her self-destructive desires.

"It's okay, I'm with Metro police. You're safe now." Nick tried to be reassuring. Yet something burned in her eyes that frightened even him; he couldn't be sure. Something tugged at him; something awful pulled at him, threatening the brittle foundation of his insubstantial humanity. Finally, Etain found the words that echoed in her mind.

"What did you do? Why didn't you just let me die?"

These words had substance, and they bit like leeches into his flesh. What made these mortals so eager to die? What weakness ebbed in humanity, what senseless waste existed in disharmony with fantastic potential? How strong they were in their weakness, how resourceful in remorse. Not this time, no; they would not get the better of him, not this time. This time he would have his way; this time he would not turn away in silent resignation. He needed no justification for his anger.

Nick whirled around, his rage almost uncontrollable, almost more than he could bare. He was on her instantly. Reaching behind him, Nick pulled out his handcuffs and fastened them to an old iron railing. Cool steel against her wrist, cool eyes against her soul, he held up his hand to quiet her mouth.

"Listen to me. You will stay here and not make a sound. You are safe now. You will be still and sleep until I return. Do you understand?"

Something more frightening that disobedience clawed at her mind.

"Not sleep, no. Please. I will not sleep." Etain's tears fell on Nick's hand and he shook her once again.

"You will be quiet and remember nothing. Do you understand?" Why wasn't she listening, what fed this unyielding discontent? Nick stared deeply into her frightened eyes, trying to calm her into submission.

Something changed in the shadows of her defiance. He could feel her surrendering what had been an irrepressible, independent will: yet it wasn't his power to which she yielded. Something different in his consciousness responded to her capitulation. His mind was suddenly, unclear; muddied in a river of emotion.

"Yes, Nicholas" she whispered, "I understand." Etain felt herself fall into the darkness of his mind, submitting to his convocation. Slowly, she relaxed under the weight of his body, stress draining itself away. He could taste the sweetness of her compliance; it lingered in his mind as he ran his hand across her sleek neck. This time, he murmured, I will not fail. Satisfied that she was safe, Nick flew back to his car and the now empty bridge.

Piqued, curious eyes watched Nick as he disappeared into the night. A new sense of fascination surged through the lifeforce of Lacroix. What was this all about? Why would Nicholas bring the mortal up here? He stared in amazement as Nicholas had subdued her. Perhaps all his teaching had not been in vain. Perhaps he could postpone the final lesson for a while longer. Had he witnesses the rebirth of his comrade, his brethren, his child?

"Not really a very safe place to leave your prize, dear boy. Anything could happen this far up into the night." He flew over to the girl, touching her soft, wet neck with the tips of his fingers. Was it possible, he wondered, for fate to step in after all these years? A twisted smile changed the expression of his open, hungry mouth.

"Sometimes," he whispered, "anticipation is the most satisfying part of the meal." He traced the steady pulse in her neck, in a long, repetitive motion.

"I'll let you keep your little trophy," he grinned.

"At least for a while."

Lacroix stood up, crossed the roof, and before taking flight, turned around once more to stare at Etain.

"Nicholas, my boy; It's been long, long time since you've surprised me like this. I'm almost tempted to be proud."

Lacroix spun on his heels and was gone in a flash; one last thought echoed back towards the roof-top.

"Almost."

* * *

Schanke was talking to the divers when Nick stepped up behind him.

"Nice of you to show up, partner. So what's it gonna take next time to get you here in time? Perhaps an invasion from Mars? Tell me, would that get your attention, Knight? I mean, where the hell you've been? Think this is my idea of a cheap thrill; come on! This was my bowling night!" Nick was used to Schanke blowing up, and blowing things out of proportion, but this time, his anger seemed all too real.

"Sorry. Traffic's all tied up, this rain sure isn't making things easier." Schanke stared at Nick, obviously unappeased.

"I left the car and headed over on foot. Looks like I got here to late. Good thing you were here to cover."

"Well, yeah. I've been organizing the patrols and coordinating with the divers, so I guess, yeah, thanks to me things are running pretty smooth." Schanke, effectively diffused, looked over at the river bridge.

"The only problem now, except for the clean-up, is the small detail of a body. I can't figure it. One minute she was standing there, the next, she wasn't. She had to jump, I mean, there's no way she could have gotten off that bridge any other way but down, but they can't find her. You know, they said it usually takes a while for the body to, you know, sink. This one must have rocks in her pockets as well as her head, 'cause she went down like a brick house."

Nick stared at the divers gearing up for another trip out into the river. He cursed under his breath to think of all this wasted effort, looking for a body that would never show up. Schanke misread his reaction.

"Yeah, it's nothing but a waste, if you ask me. What kind of crazy throws herself off a bridge? I mean, there's got to be a better way to pull your own plug, especially for a woman. Well you know, they don't have to worry about what their buddies would say. There's got to be a better way to cash it

in, without taking the big plunge. What a way to go, with half the city watching. But then you know women, they always gotta make big exits, don't they?"

Nick only nodded in agreement.

"Sun's coming up soon. I'd better get back. I owe you one partner." Nick didn't wait for an answer. Driving back to the building where he left Etain, he wondered just what had brought this woman to the bridge. This time, he would have his answers.

* * *

She was sleeping when he climbed the last step that led to the roof. Obviously, his powers of control were not as unsteady as he had once feared. Bending down to where she lay, he wiped her hair away from her face: anger absent, her peaceful countenance disguised any trace of a troubled heart. Somehow he must discover the source of her pain. Somehow, he would pull her back from the edge. This time, the angel of death would return empty handed. She never stirred as he carried her down to the car. Once inside, Nick leaned over to wake her.

"Wake up. It's time to wake up." Gently, Nick shook her shoulders until she opened her eyes. Slowly, carefully, he waited for her to speak, and met her with forgiving eyes.

"Where am I?"

"Right now, in my car. But if you tell me your name, and where you live, than maybe we'll be on our way. You remember me, I'm detective Knight. My friends call me Nick." She only turned away, staring at the changing sky.

"I bet someone is very worried about you right now. Maybe I should call someone?" She didn't move, she didn't speak, Nick knew she really didn't care. This was not going to be easy. At last, he tried to charm her.

"Why don't we get a cup of coffee or something? Come on, we're both soaked from the rain, it would be nice to warm up a little."

Etain turned tired eyes upon him.

"God, forbid, I wouldn't want to die from a cold!" She hadn't meant to be funny, but Nick couldn't help but laugh, just a bit. Despite herself, Etain laughed too, at the irony of it all.

"It could only happen to me," she said. "My granddad always told me I'd be late for my own funeral, and he was right." Nick moved a caring hand across her back; half smiling, half laughing he tried to warm her against the early morning chill. The darkness seemed a little less inviting to her now. This strange man beside her had a calming effect on her strained nerves; in his eyes, she saw something more than gentleness and compassion, she saw something frighteningly familiar that gnawed at her mind.

"So, back to the beginning. I'm Nick, and you're..."

"Etain, Dr. Etain Kerr. And I live at the University. How's that?"

"Very good, Etain Kerr. Now how about that cup of coffee?"

Nick smiled at her, and then he smiled to himself. As he pulled the car into traffic, he was sure he could break down her barriers and help her back to herself.

* * *

A figure in shadow stepped out of the darkness and watched the car speed away. Gazing at the sky, he knew the time had come to seek shelter until another nightfall.

"Prophecy is a dangerous gift, my boy. How little we know about ourselves, until it's all but too late. Yes, Nicholas; it's getting much too late for you and I, and for your little friend." If Lacroix felt any regret, he hid from the world, and from himself.

"Yes. I'm afraid it's getting much too late." As daylight threatened, Lacroix took to the inconstant sky.

* * *

FOREVER

Etain turned her key and unlocked the rear door that led to the university archives. Nick followed her through the long, dark corridors that led to the small, windowless room Etain now called home. Housed in many cardboard boxes were the remnants of a life of scholarship and travel. She lit the candles that lined a fairly large desk, covered with folders and books, and sank down onto the dormitory-style cot. Glancing around, Nick wondered if this woman had any life at all besides school.

Having cleared the books off the chair, she gestured for him to sit down. What on earth was she doing? One minute she's ready to end it all, the next, she's entertaining strange men. Well, one strange man at any rate. Yet he didn't seem that strange at all. Conspicuously staring at him, Etain could not shake the feeling that his face was familiar. Realistically, she realized that they had never met, and she hadn't been in town that long to have accidentally run into him. Besides, she remembered everything. Unlikely as it was, though, it was the only logical explanation. Suddenly, she became painstakingly aware that minutes had passed since he first sat down. Embarrassed, Etain stumbled for something to say.

"Sorry about the mess. I hadn't planned on company."

"It looks cozy." Well, that was an obvious lie, he thought, and she knew it. Nick hated this kind of small-talk, especially when something important was not being said.

"Have you been teaching here long?"

"About four months. When the history department offered me the post as associate professor of British history, I thought 'great', this must be the big time. They promised me resident housing, at least till I got settled into the area. Unfortunately, no one told the housing office. Now, they think that their doing me a favour letting me stay in this glorified closet. Not to mention, that my grant money is tied up in bureaucratic red-tape. Even if I had the time to find a place, I wouldn't have the money. It's not much, I'll grant you, but for the moment, this is home."

That would make anyone a bit depressed, thought Nick. Still, he was sure that a housing dilemma hadn't driven her to the bridge. At least now, he could talk to her; get her to open up. He knew that the sun had already risen over the city. Sitting back in the desk chair, Nick accidentally knocked over a small box and scattered what appeared to be very old papers across the floor.

"Sorry. Let me help you with..."

"Don't touch them!" Etain leaped to her feet, startling him both with her quickness and the sharpness of her voice. Down on her knees, she gingerly arranged the papers into a pile, and as she did, mumbled to herself in solitary tones. She looked so helpless then, like a child separated from her mother in a crowded store. He knelt beside her, taking by the hand.

"Look, I didn't mean to upset you. I'm sorry." Etain didn't look at him; she didn't say a word. Slowly, she brought her hands up to cover her face and wept without reservation. Nick helped her up to the cot. He rocked her gently, trying to calm her; yet feeling that very same helplessness, he waited patiently for her tears to subside.

"Etain, please tell me why you were on that bridge tonight. Listen, I know I can help, if you let me."

"Unless you've got some magic powers to read my mind and tell me whether or not I'm losing it, there's nothing you can do." Etain tried to pull away, but Nick refused to let her go. Shaking her, much like a father shakes a disobedient child, his eyes scolding but sympathetic, he brought her crying to an end.

"Why do you think you're losing your mind?"

Yes. Finally. Someone had finally said it. I'm losing my mind, she thought, but at least someone else would know. Could she really tell him; was there any chance that he might understand? That was all she really wanted, for someone, anyone to share in this terrible dream. She stared at Nick and wondered. She reached out to touch him, as if to make sure that he was real. Satisfied, she took a deep breath and began.

"Since I was a child, I've had visions, like I was seeing things with someone else's eyes. When I told my parents, they just told me it was the books I read. That's why I became an historian, you know; so I could discover the truth through my own eyes." She turned those eyes, now sad toward the door, as

if she expected someone to step through, to tell her it was all just a bad dream. But no one came: like always, she was a lonely child standing in an empty, evil world.

"The visions stopped for a while. For a time, I almost felt free; when I got here, they only became worse. I don't have a normal life; it's like I've picked up some rare disease. I can't sleep, I can barely eat, and more times than not, I'm not doing my best work. I'll be lucky if they don't fire me. You know, sometimes I feel like the walking dead."

Nick shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"I've been looking for the answers all my life, and I've found nothing. That is until I arrived here. While I was researching local family histories of Guilford dating back to the Reformation, I ran across some interesting letters written by a young heretic supposedly burned during the Marian persecutions. At first, I just thought it was a mistake; after all, it was such a confusing time. Her name was listed among the family death roles, but it was removed from Smithfield records of the late 1550's. Two letters, personal letters, I found in uncatalogued records, dated two days apart confirm that she was due to be executed, but also confirm that she escaped the burning. I had the handwriting analyzed, and I was right. Both letters were written by the same hand."

Etain started to shake, almost uncontrollably. Nick didn't move to stop her: eyes wide he watched her pull her dark, brown hair away from a face that he had seen in another lifetime.

"It was only professional curiosity on my part, at least that's what I told myself, until I had a friend in the States examine the handwriting. He's an expert, and his opinion would have given me something on which to base an article for publication. I sent it off, with just a quick note I jotted down on the way to the post-office. The day it arrived, he faxed me back; I thought it had to be important for him to answer so fast, he's usually so slow. He was thanking me for the practical joke. 'Next time,' he said, 'if I want to waste his time, the least I should do is not forge documents in my own handwriting'." She waited, but Nick remained silently still. She waited; this was the reaction she should have expected, she thought. Foolish really, to think he might understand.

"Don't you get it, the handwriting on the letters matched my handwriting on the note. This is no joke! Those letters are verified authentic sixteenth-century. Don't you see what that means?" Etain was screaming at him.

"This is real, empirical evidence and no matter how much I want to forget, my mind, my historically objective mind comes to only one conclusion. I never believed in fairy tales, in past lives, in myths or legends; not when I had fact, cold hard fact to fall back on." By now, Etain was pacing back and forth, trying to escape reality as a wounded animal tries to tear itself out of the hunters trap. Tired, she sat back down, resigned to her isolation.

"I always thought that someone else was in my head, no matter what those self-aggrandizing psychiatrists said. I told my parents they were only throwing good money after bad. It's almost funny; at least it might be if it wasn't me. What should I do now that my entire life, at least the life I am living now, has been undermined by some demon from the past? What, in God's name do I do now?

Nick had no answer for the stranger that stared at him with ancient eyes. He felt the pull of time against his flesh and hoped he had not saved her, only to have her slip from his grasp once again.

Voices could be heard from the air vent and Etain grimaced knowing she was going to be late for her twelve o'clock seminar. Rising to her feet, an effort that seemed to absorb all of her strength, she make her way towards Nick and gathered up her books.

"Listen, I have to go. My graduate students will only wait so long before they go crying to the department head; the little bastards think they own the world. You can let yourself out." She tried to slip out behind his chair, but he caught her by her wrist and for what might have been seconds or hours, she stood motionless by his side. Looking into his face, Etain felt the tug of distant memories. A shadow formed, and like the tide, effortless rose into the night. At the very edge of reality, she caught sight of what remained of her sanity. Once again, Etain found herself gazing into the blue eyes of the strange man. She flashed him a smile though she knew her hopes were dashed on the rocky shores of her humanity.

"We've got to finish this." Nick raised his eyes to meet hers. He waited for a sign of some remembrance in her sad, grey eyes. Her smile faded as she tried to turn away.

"Look at me, Etain."

Briefly, he saw himself within the dark recesses of those eyes. It was a reflection of the man he used to be: compassionate, yet cruel; confident, yet ruled by a chaos greater than himself. It was almost too much for him to bear. Then he saw the recognition slide from her consciousness, shunned by her reason and discarded by her fears. Nick let go of her arm.

"Maybe it is finished. I'll be in my office tonight, you can find me there if you want to talk. We can chat about my pending insanity, or perhaps you can tell me why I shouldn't have jumped off the bridge last night, because right now, I'm not so sure how glad I am that you stopped me. Truly, Nicholas, I'm not so sure of anything." The door closed slowly behind her, leaving Nick alone with his ever-constant memory and her ever-threatening madness.

In the hours of daylight that remained after Etain had gone, Nick searched through her papers hoping to find some other explanation for her visions. She'd mentioned psychiatrists: perhaps she simply was unstable. After all, she had tried to kill herself; who knew if this was the first time. Delusion took control of many good, intelligent people; Etain might just be one of the unfortunate few. However desperately Nick needed to convince himself that Etain was deranged, ultimately, he became more desperate to discover the truth. His hands fell to his sides in the absolute realization that none of that was true. He knew who she was, even if she had not known herself. Wasn't that what he wanted to do, to bring her back to herself? How wonderful to be so prophetic, he mused sarcastically. Deny it though he tried, the proof remained tangible and ultimately, undeniable. As the evening slipped quietly into twilight, Nick knew it was time to head for the station. Putting the letters in his coat, he remembered the confusion on Etain's clear, angelic face. Telling her would be hard. Helping her live with it would be even harder.

Somehow, Etain made it through the day. Most of her classes had run themselves. Letting the grad-students lead impromptu discussions had been a successful, if not popular idea. Little did they know that she had hardly listened. An occasional cryptic comment was all it took to maintain the appearance of direction. She wondered just how many of her professors had spent class time mulling over personal problems. If she kept this up, she was sure her contract would not be renewed.

Back in her office that night, Etain half-listened to one of her students as he tried to explain the intricacies of sixteenth-century anti-papist sentiment. She hadn't slept, how long had it been; it seemed like ages since she made it through the night without those dreams, those terrible dreams. Slipping out of herself, she could feel their seductive pull even now.

Smoky mist held her fast against the night, she could feel the heat, but she couldn't see the fire. Putting fear behind her, she slipped in duty blind, moving without will throughout the sky. Silent sorrow leads her by a cold, yet caring hand towards the edge of a what might be a mountain. She wants to follow, but she can't find the way. Looking behind her the water turns icy blue: too tired to swim, too far out to turn back, she feels the hand that once guided her push her down under the cold, black surface. She can hear him, but she cannot cry out. Someone is standing beside her, but when she looks, he turns and walks away. She is alone, dying, broken. The mist swirls around her and in moonlight, she disappears beneath the sky. Suddenly, she could hear another voice.

"Do you think I'll have any problems on the exam, Doc?"

Falling back into herself, Etain clumsily managed to disguise her confusion.

"I wouldn't worry about it. Just make sure you don't overlook the obvious. Oh, and Gareth, do you call all your professors 'Doc', or am I only one of a select few?" Unexpectedly, Etain watched his face brighten.

"You're the only one I really talk to outside of class, Dr. Kerr. I mean, I really love this stuff, and you make it all so interesting. I actually find myself in the library when I don't have to be. Sometimes I think that if I can find the answers to some historical question, that I must be able to find the answers to my simple problems. I don't know, I guess that sounds kinda silly, huh."

She knew how ridiculous she must have looked, but she couldn't help smile at him as a tear rolled silently down her cheek.

"Silly, no. I know just what you mean. But be careful. There's two things you should remember. First, no problem is ever simple. Second, don't look for answers to questions that don't need to be asked; sometimes you get more than you bargained for. Don't let this go to your head, now, but I can see a great potential in you. You've got the desire, now you only have to learn to control it. Once you learn to hone your skills, I've got a feeling I'm going to have to watch out for the competition."

"Thanks, Doc. That means a lot coming from you." Blushing as he backed out of the office, Gareth waved good-bye and stumbled into the hall.

Sometimes, she thought, she almost believed that life was worth all the trouble.

* * *

Back at the station, Nick cleared away the reports from his desk. Usually, a quiet night was a welcome change, but tonight, the quiet burrowed into his mind and gave him too much time to think. So Etain had a past life; well, how difficult was that to believe when he himself was proof of the supernatural? But for her to be the same girl that he saved from the flames, the same girl that wanted to save him, how could he accept that? He didn't want to accept it, just as he did not want to accept responsibility for the death of that innocent girl. What would Elaine have thought about reincarnation? For a Christian believer, it might be tantamount to damnation: not to know the saving grace that she had believed in so deeply, the same saving grace she tried so desperately to bring to him; had he damned Elaine just as Lacroix had damned him, ripping the foundation of heaven out from under her feet? Had she come back here to haunt him? He knew the answer was no. She was unaware of his identity, unaware that he was part of her visions: if he had known, she would not be so desperate for answers. Unconsciously though, she had to know; yes, he remembered, on the roof she had called him Nicholas long before he had ever told her his name. It was undeniable. Resolved, he knew he had to tell her tonight; after all, she might figure it out for herself, and then she would never trust him. IT might drive her back to the bridge. This was one mistake he would not allow history, or himself, to repeat.

Etain clicked her computer off just as the security guard began his last check around the grounds. He wasn't surprised to see Dr. Kerr's light still on; no, that was one light that always shined through the night. Etain went over to close the window, as usual, waved good-night as he passed by. Lingering, she let the cool mid-night air wash over her as moonlight bathed the campus is a warm, gentle glow. Too bad, she thought. Nick wasn't coming, she might as well face it; just another victim of her madness running for cover, no doubt. What was it about him that made her feel just a little less alone? Something about him felt so familiar. Yet, he wasn't like anyone she'd ever met before: no one had ever really tried to help her, no one ever wanted to get involved. Why did he save her? More importantly, how did he save her? Something didn't make sense: who was she kidding, most everything in her life didn't make sense.

"Could I really be going crazy?" This strange man rescued her from her own violent hand; he seemed truly concerned. Nobody loves an ingrate, she thought. So, why didn't he show up tonight?

"Get a grip, Etain other people have a life, you know. Probably he just got tied up at work." Then she stopped. What was this? Her doubting Thomas taking the night off?

"Aren't we optimistic, tonight?" Now, I'm talking to myself, she thought. Well, why not? She was still thinking about Gareth. She could make a difference in some else's life, even if she couldn't solve her own problems. Deciding on a late-night walk, she scribbled a note to Nick, and pinned it to the bulletin board outside her office door.

Outside the crisp air whipped around her head, and her hair blew wild in its whistling dance. It was about time for a new coat; maybe tomorrow her money would be available, and she'd have herself a bit of a spree. Somehow she felt just a little bit freer, just a little bit more human. Confession must be good for the soul: yes, she certainly had to thank Nicholas for his help. Funny, it seems more natural to call him Nicholas; I'll have to ask him if he minds.

Etain found herself in a part of campus she hadn't yet had time to explore. In a small park that overlooked the central library, she caught a glimpse of a dark shadow moving rapidly through the sky. She turned, but it was gone. As she looked up towards the darkened heavens, a cold hand touched her shoulder, a cold voice whispered in her ear.

"It's been a very, very long time, my dear."

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" Etain want' sure if she should be excited or afraid; perhaps she was just a little bit of both.

"Not by name, of course. But you and I are not strangers. Think hard, my child, listen carefully; do you not know me? Don't you know what I can do?" The man placed his arms around her, not very tightly, but she knew she had no will to move against him. He towered over her, and leaning into her, his whispers turned to deafness and she could hear him only in her mind. She closed her eyes. She could feel her visions taking flight, animated in a dreamscape that surrounded her in darkness.

Etain could see the fire dancing in the hearth, she could see the broken shutter banging in the driving rain against the cottage wall. Praying to her God for courage, the dark-haired girl lifted her face and saw the darkened heavens through the open window. Her expression melted from acceptance to uncertainty. Out of nowhere, a voice was raging in her mind.

..I have forsaken you, for you have sheltered mine enemy...I can no longer hear your cries...seek not salvation, for you are already dead to me...you are forever alone...

Where the voice came from, Etain could not tell. Herself voiceless, she watched as the girl knelt beside the fire and screamed in agony as her heart burst in discontented anguish. Etain could feel the heat surge through her body, sharp sounds tore at her soul, tore at the centre of her being. The voice cut her down like daggers, tearing at the very core of this poor, tormented girl.

"Elaine," she thought. "I'm here, I've always been here." But Etain's compassion could not cross the barriers of time; Elaine would never hear her words of comfort. Nothing could overpower that voice. That voice. Etain knew that voice. Time closed in on Etain as she listened to the echo of her cries; above all this suffering, Etain discovered where the torture came from. Moving back to herself, a dark figure wrapped her warmly in the shrouds of night as the icy knife of death called her name. In that instant, she left her safety and walked amongst her enemies. She was lost in the beauty of dying, its softness still warm upon her lips. This was the nectar of a forbidden stream, the place where the sour turns to sweet. Abruptly, the shadows of night disappeared and she could feel his pleasure rise as swiftly as she felt the cresting of her pain. A blackness devoured her, and them recoiled as suddenly as it came.

Etain broke away from the tall, blond man; a strength within her grew beyond any she had ever known. She turned and faced him, his eyes more golden than his face in moonlight.

"You. I do know you. At least I know your voice. You sent that young, innocent girl to her death. Yes, I know you."

Lacroix grinned at her in triumph with the satisfaction of a proud father.

"She chose death by her own hand. I merely pointed out the way. Shall I do the same for you? Or perhaps you already know the way. I wouldn't be surprised, you already know so much." He walked around her, examining her with searching eyes; yes, he thought, this one will be different. This one will be mine.

"What are you?"

"I'm not that different from you, Etain. We are more alike than you would know. Lovers of history, seekers of knowledge, yes, we are very much the same you and I. Have you discovered the true power inherent in your knowledge? What is it that all your lessons have taught you? Tell me, child. Show me what you're made of."

Something snapped in her mind, something that had alluded her all her years of questing. All the missing pieces suddenly fit into place. The visions disappeared in one apprehending cry. It almost took her breath away. Etain laughed aloud at the very thought of it. She had, just as she had always warned, overlooked the obvious.

FOREVER

"All the answers, to all the questions, are there, waiting for us, like a river of knowledge overflowing the fragile banks of humanity. All it takes is the courage to see the truth."

Lacroix bowed to her in deference of her hard-won wisdom.

"You are the strong one, Etain. That girl who fell so long ago, she was weak and pathetic. She was nothing. She could never have survived what you have undergone. You emerge victorious, glorified in your new life. Can you feel yourself changing, can you feel yourself becoming more perfectly what you were destined to be?"

"I know that I'm free from the past that held me prisoner for so long. Now my life is my own. For the first time, I feel that I am free." She whirled around, the glory of her discovery music to her quickened step. So like a child, Lacroix thought. Beautiful and free; it would be a long time before he became bored with this one. As if the tune had come to its end, Etain stilled herself and faced him. She was not afraid.

"I suppose I should thank you for your help." Looking around as if she had somewhere else to be, she realized that she had caught him by surprise. Then Etain watched his smile turn mercenary. His eyes betrayed the injustice of her sarcasm.

"Thank you. And good-bye."

Lacroix grabbed her roughly as she tried to walk away.

"Not so fast, little one. We're not through yet. Do you think that you can simply walk away, turn and never look back? Do you think that you can ever be free? We are bound forever by time and by blood. Nothing will ever change that; no, not this time." Lacroix's stalwart arms tenderly wrapped themselves around her body; the regret he might have felt hidden beneath his baneful grin.

"Come with me; I have much to teach you, my child."

The night closed in upon her. Once again, she found herself standing on the river bridge, alone with her dark angel.

Nick waited almost an hour outside Etain's office before he decided it was time to leave. An uneasiness settled on him, like something familiar gnawing at his mind; something he could neither see nor hear, but knew, nonetheless, was ever-present. He was losing his patience; he had to find her before she did something rash. If he lost her this time, he would have to search the rest of eternity to find her again. Amends must be made, he thought; if I can save her, maybe, I can save myself. In a flash of hope, Nick took to the sky. As he flew close, he saw a dark-haired woman standing on the bridge. Time had not been cruel; he still had a chance.

"Etain, no." Nick edged up behind her, waiting to make his move.

"I'm not going to jump Nicholas. Not this time." He stared at her, wishing she would turn around, wishing he could see what was in her eyes. What would bring her here if she wasn't going to jump? Her voice had changed somehow; it was colder, less inviting.

"I waited for you for over an hour. I was worried." Something was wrong. Nick knew something was very, very wrong. After an uncomfortably long pause, Etain spoke.

"I ran into an old friend of yours. A very old friend. And he gave me a message for you. 'Next time' he said, 'when you betray him, you had better make sure he's absolutely dead'." She paused just long enough catch her breath in the cool late-night air.

"Oh yes, one other thing he wanted you to know. 'He says you're getting very sloppy, Nicholas. Very, very sloppy'."

Nick knew what had been gnawing at him, he had sensed another, but how could it be Lacroix? Hadn't he killed him that night in the loft? Yet, hadn't he felt the vibrations of much too familiar chord, its music echoing in the chambers of his memory? In that private room, he had thought himself alone; now he recognized the shadows of his silent companion rise to meet him. This tune he had known for centuries. How, he asked himself, could it be anything else? He felt the hair on the back of his neck rise, and the fury overtook him.

"Where is he Etain? Where is Lacroix?"

She searched the stars, searched the sky for a chance that this was all another of her troubled visions. God had sent no angel this time. Sighing, she faced the cold, hard, undisputable fact that this was all too real.

"Gone, Nicholas. He's gone."

"No. Don't let him use you to trick me, Etain. I have so much to tell you." Nick started toward her, and stopped dead when she turned around with eyes as golden as his own. Etain met Nick's fury with the unencumbered strength of her own.

"Now we are alike, all of us. This is his present to me; for you, this is his thank you for your treachery, Nicholas. Something about killing two birds with one stone. Yes, he's very efficient, your Lacroix. Don't look so surprised; it isn't the first time we failed at saving one another." She turned vicious eyes toward the darkness, then back again at Nick.

"There's something more, though. He wants me to take your place beside him. He wants to teach me, to make me become what he failed to make you."

Nick backed away from the fire in her eyes. What had he done? If only he had told her right away, if only he had stayed with her, if only he had been honest. He had to face the truth; it might have been better if he had let her die that night on the bridge, Lacroix never would have taken her. Nick could do nothing but turn away, his rage now muted by his silent lamentations.

"How many times can you turn away from me, how many of my lives can you throw away? Why didn't you tell me last night, who you are and what you are?" Each outburst brought her one step closer to him. She was almost upon him, her eyes blazing with the terror of a caged animal.

"What am I to do now, Nicholas, now that I am dead to all that I loved? What you refused to risk last night, to place yourself in jeopardy, has placed my life, my very soul at risk. How could I defend myself against an evil I didn't even know existed? It might as well have been you who brought me to this, Nicholas. My blood may not be in your veins, but surely, it is on your hands."

Nick reeled back from the torrent of her words. Dying might be cruelty to the unsuspecting, but its' sting was fleeting. This pain, now their pain, was eternal. Falling to his knees, Nick collapsed under the burden of his guilt.

Etain could not look away. Unleashed, her demons were unstoppable. Unbridled, they would rip her, and all around her, to shreds. This was an unholy power; somehow she must control it, or else she would be consumed. She knelt down beside him; her eyes full of tears, her hands outstretched, Etain whispered softly her pleas for forgiveness.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. You're only fault was trying to save me. Oh Nicholas, it would have been better if you had let me die." She turned away, her fury gone, her hoped lost in sorrow.

"I failed again," Nick murmured under desperate sighs. The stars that one shined on an innocent martyr no longer sparkled under heavens watchful eye. Tonight, for Nick and Etain, the stars were nothing but dead echoes of voiceless music. He took her offered hands in his, and before he lifted his eyes to meet hers, he realized that someone else truly understood. He didn't have to tell her how cruel and heartlessly he had been taken: no, she knew all too well. Somehow he felt less alone that he had in years. Then he looked at her, and saw the pain mirrored in the grey blush of her eyes; it was then that he remembered the agony of the conquered.

"Etain, I'm the one whose sorry. I can't change what Lacroix has done, but I can teach you what you need to know." Nick held her closer. Their eyes met in sad, blue reflections of long, lost memories neither of them could ever relive.

"I know, Etain," he whispered over her crying. "Believe me, I know." He brushed back her hair, and running his hand over her pale neck, found the marks of Lacroix's conquest.

"Can you feel the hunger?"

Holding back her tears, Etain looked away.

"Not any more."

Unsure, Nick gazed at her in disbelief.

"When Lacroix brought me back to the bridge, the deed was already done. He took me in the middle of one of my visions, and I couldn't separate the pain of remembering, with the pain of submission. I

thought I could just walk away, but he held my mind, and though I struggled, I could not break free. He said it was because I was weak, that I needed to feed. Then, only then he said, would I be able to stand on my own. I cursed him; he only laughed at me. Just before he left, he said I would come to him, needing him, and then my lessons would begin. I could think of nothing but dying. It was all I craved. I decided just to wait for the sun, to meet death as I had always intended, on my own terms. A young woman, not that much younger than I, crossed the bridge, stopped, and asked me if I knew what time it was. All I could think of was that it was time to die. Before I could stop myself, she was dying in my arms, her blood coursing through me. I could taste her death, Nicholas. I could feel her give her last breath to me, and God help me, I relished it." She shuddered at the memory.

"God help me, indeed, Nicholas. What have I become?"

Nick knew only too well what happened when reason loses its control over desire. He could not judge her; he could, however, help her.

"What did you do with the body?"

"I could feel nothing but repulsion at what I had done. I had to be rid of her, so I picked her up, and threw her over the rails into the river below."

Nick leaned over, but could see nothing in the silent mirror of the water.

"Ironic, isn't it? Now, at least, they'll find a body."

"There are other ways besides killing, Etain. Let me teach you. You can still live a normal life..."

"Normal? How can you call this normal? It's inhuman, Nicholas; you and I, we aren't human. No one to love, no one to trust, my God, how do you live like this?"

"The only way I can, one step at a time. We're not alone, though. There are others like us, right here in the city. You don't have to be alone." Nick closed his arms around her.

"What happens now?" she said.

"It's almost morning, we have to leave. We have to find shelter." Nick's hand slipped into hers, and she clasped it with the desperation of a lost child.

"Come with me, Etain."

Together they cut through the early morning fog, and reached Nick's place before the first rays of sunlight cut into the receding night sky.

Together they slept in sorrow's silent prayer as the sun make its way across the horizon.

Together they dreamed of walking in its warmth, afraid of nothing, loving everything.

Alone, Nicholas woke to find her note, written in a solemn hand, that told him she was gone.

...It seems I have been walking among the living and the dead, and I have found comfort nowhere but by your side. You have been with me throughout time, but now I must find the way alone. There is something in me now that cannot be denied, something that you have long since conquered. I hunger for more than blood, I hunger for revenge. Lacroix said he was my father now, as he was yours so long ago. Well, my brother, I will avenge our suffering and our father will regret the day that he first walked upon the earth. This is my promise, my solemn vow. Remember me, Nicholas. I will find my way back, someday. Look to the stars, maybe you'll see me there. Until then, I remain, another, Dark Angel.

Etain

Nick folded up the letter and placed it, along with the two from his coat, in the small, black box he kept hidden in the fireplace bricks. Etain was finally on her own; without any help from him, or from Lacroix. The name made him shiver. What would happen now, he could only imagine. The heath-haze stretched out to catch the glittering light reflected on the silver chain around Nick's neck. He never got a chance to give it back to her; she didn't even know he had saved it from the fall. It was beautiful, and it was hers. One winged-angel against a crescent moon lay cool against his skin; running his fingers along its shape, he could still feel her there beside him.

"It's come full circle," Nick whispered to himself. Maybe this time, if there was a forgiving God, Etain would find a way to save herself. Maybe this time, she would find a way to save them both.

FOREVER

TARA '94

An Invitation To the Dance

by Susan M. Garrett

THERE WERE FOUR video tapes on the table. Nick pawed through the titles with moderate disinterest. Natalie walked into the living room, carrying a coffee cup. Frowning, she walked over to the coffee table and picked up one of the tapes. "Bad choices?" she asked.

He shrugged, picking up another tape from the top of the pile. "*Odd* choices," he corrected. "This one, for example."

She looked at the tape in his hand. "You have a problem with Vincent Price?"

"*The Conqueror Worm*? No. But this—"

"*Masque of the Red Death*?"

"It's wrong." Nick seated himself on the couch. "It's all wrong."

Tossing her own tape onto the table, Natalie frowned, seating herself beside him. "Roger Corman's never been known for *great* movies," she admitted, "but it's one of the best of his Poe adaptations."

"Not the movie—the story."

"What about the story?"

"It's *wrong*."

Natalie stared at him. "Edgar Allan Poe was wrong?"

"Didn't I just say that? Now, are we going to watch this movie—"

"No-no-no—hang on a minute." Natalie held up one finger, holding his gaze. "I read that story in high school. In fact, I read most of those stories in high school."

"Congratulations." Rising to his feet, Nick, walked over to the VCR and inserted the tape in the machine. "All I'm saying is that he got the story wrong."

"And you *know*?"

"Of course I know. I was *there*." Picking up the remote, he turned toward her. "Do you want to watch the tape?"

"In a minute." She smiled suspiciously. "You're putting me on, aren't you?" Then, when he didn't answer, the smile fell from her lips. "You're *serious*?"

"Of course." He returned to the couch and sat beside her. "I *was* there." He was on the verge of pointing the remote at the machine when Natalie grabbed it from his hand. "What?"

"So what *did* happen? And how did Poe hear about the story?"

"I'm not sure about the second part—*I* didn't tell him. And I know Janette and Lacroix couldn't have spoken to him." He paused, glancing down at the cover of the tape box. "As far as what really happened . . . ."

The darkness came, as it always did, despite the bodies that littered the countryside and the panic that gripped the land. Yawning, Nicholas paused in the doorway of the main room of the house they'd chosen to inhabit, a small place, not more than half a league from a dozen villages, towns, and estates. The sound of laughter had awakened him. That, and the hunger that burned in his stomach.

He'd no sooner entered the room than some filmy gauze scarf was thrown across his face, accompanied by a laugh from Janette. He wrenched it away, smiling, then his eyes opened wide in amazement. She was wearing the clothing of a woman from a harem, popular perhaps two centuries before.

Seeing she'd captured his attention, she turned, raising her foot daintily in a dance step. Small bells chimed and the metal beads that decorated the number of scarves she wore clicked together as she moved. The costume would've been inappropriately daring in a harem. In the Italian countryside, it was positively scandalous.

Quickly, he grabbed a cloak and threw it over her, asking, "You can't intend on going outside in *that*?"

Laughing gaily, Janette threw off the cloak and wrapped her arms around him. "You don't *approve*, Nicolah?"

"I *do* believe he's blushing," said Lacroix. He paused in the open doorway, dressed in the maroon striped toga of a Roman senator. "Nicholas, you must learn to rid yourself of that mortal baggage. Learn to enjoy yourself. You're well into your second century, after all."

The situation was going from bad to worse. Nick was wearing a loose doublet, unlaced, and hose. He was certain of the century *and* the place. Had he gone mad? "What are you playing at?"

"We've been invited to a masque," said Janette, dancing around him, the bells of her outfit ringing as she moved.

As if to confirm, Lacroix tossed him a rolled piece of parchment. Catching it, Nick unrolled the message, then found the ink was flaking off on his fingers as he touched it. Tentatively, he tasted one of the flakes, his eyes widening in surprise. The message had been written in blood.

It was simple and concise—they were invited to a masque at the palace of Prince Prospero, this evening. Suspicious, he re-rolled the message and tossed it to one side. "What do we know about this 'Prince'?"

"Oh, what does it matter." Janette flopped onto a cushioned chair, draping her legs over the arm, and pouted. "It's a *party*, Nicolah! We *must* go."

"It'll do us well to get out," agreed Lacroix. Walking past her, he flipped her feet to one side, forcing her to sit upright on the chair as he rested on the arm. "We're *going*. The question is, what shall you be?"

"Me?" Nick stared at them, as if they'd gone mad. "If you haven't noticed, they're dying in droves out there. The plague's spreading faster every day. They've even stopped burying the bodies."

"That *could* delay us," admitted Lacroix. "I'd arranged for horses, but if the roads become impassable—"

"I *won't* fly," declared Janette, sitting up on the cushions and gesturing down at her harem outfit. "It's just too drafty."

"Agreed. I've got that problem myself." Lacroix nodded toward her and she settled back in the chair, with a self-satisfied smile. Then he turned his gaze to Nicholas, frowning. "But that doesn't address our problem as to what Nicholas should wear. Something suitable. Something . . . clerical?"

Janette sat forward quickly. "A bishop?" she offered. "Or a cardinal? Red suits him."

Shaking his head, Nick sat down on a bench and clasped his hands together, "You're not listening. We don't have time for a masque. We have to move on . . . tonight. There's nothing alive for a league in any direction."

"We'll feed at the masque," corrected Lacroix. "And much as I like Janette's suggestions, neither choice is suitable, no materials at hand. But . . . a mendicant preacher? Your boots are rough enough, and I think we've still got that robe from that monk you found last week, Janette?" Rising to his feet, he touched her arm, gesturing toward a pile of clothing in the corner.

Sighing reluctantly, she rose and walked over to the clothing, daintily picking through the items until she held up a rough-hewn cloak with the tips of her fingers. Wrinkling her nose, she added, "It stinks."

"Just as well, if he's to be a mendicant." He gestured and she threw the robe to Nicholas. "The cross might be a problem."

Catching the robe with his hand as it almost sailed past him, Nicholas looked up quickly at Lacroix's comment. He couldn't believe they were *serious*.

"Then again, if he's a mendicant preacher . . . perhaps he's too poor to own a cross." Lacroix smiled, then gestured. "Put it on. If we're to reach the masque in good time, we should leave immediately."

Lacroix's expression left no room for refusal. Muttering beneath his breath, Nicholas slipped the tattered robe over his doublet, then rose to his feet. Janette walked over to him and adjusted the robe, stepping back to eye him speculatively. "Acceptable," she announced, after a moment's pause. Then she wrinkled her nose again. "But ride downwind of me. It still stinks."

Nicholas reached out to catch her, but she slipped away, squealing. Janette picked up her cloak and darted out the door. Following her, Nicholas found himself outside.

The horses were saddled, their reins tied to a post outside the house—that was where Lacroix had come from earlier. Realizing that he'd been duped into consenting to the enterprise, he took a step back toward the door, but Lacroix was standing there. Eyeing Nicholas, he firmly closed the door behind him, then slipped his cloak over his shoulders. "Let's be off. We don't want to keep our hostess waiting."

There was nothing to do but follow along. With the population of the countryside dead or dying of plague, an invitation to a masque seemed sheer folly, but he knew that tonight, at least, it simply wasn't worth the effort to revolt. Lacroix was already astride his horse, pulling Janette to a pillion behind his saddle, where she swung her legs sideways. Untying the reins from the post, Nicholas climbed into the saddle and headed after them. Each time his horse drew too close to the one in the lead, Janette held her nose and shook her head.

Annoyed, he spurred the horse to catch up with them, but she leaned forward and said something to Lacroix. Their horse's pace changed from a steady canter to a gallop. Despite the fact that the horse ahead of him had two riders, his own horse seemed unable to draw abreast or match the pace—Lacroix had chosen the faster of the two animals. He pressed his own horse, urging it onward as best he could, keeping them in sight, as they travelled through the Northern Italian countryside. With no idea of their destination, Nicholas knew that he might wander for hours before picking up their trail should he lose them. And however much he hated the idea of attending the party, he disliked spending an evening lost in the woods even more.

Eventually, Lacroix's horse slowed and stopped before a fortified palazzo. A century ago, it had been a fortress, but the additions had changed it from an armed camp to the home of a wealthy nobleman. Unfortunately, there appeared to be no drawbridge or means across the stagnant moat.

Lacroix dismounted and walked to the edge of the moat. Nicholas slipped from his saddle, tied the reins of his horse to a tree, then walked to Janette, who was still seated on the pillion. Reaching up, he lifted her from the saddle. She clung to him a moment, then took his hand as he led her down the rough dirt trail, to the water's edge.

"So much for your invitation," he told Lacroix cheerfully. "It seems we're not expected."

"Prospero closed his fortress to save himself and his own from the plague." Lacroix smiled at Nicholas, over his shoulder. "Drafty as it might be, a short flight seems to be in order."

Lacroix took to the air, followed quickly by Janette. After a pause, Nicholas joined them, landing lightly on the battlements. "Are you *certain* we've been invited?" he asked, needling Lacroix.

In response, Lacroix stalked to an iron door set in the tower wall. It had been bolted closed, but he ripped it easily from its hinges, then tossed it into the moat below. "We're expected," he said sharply, then ducked to enter the low doorway.

Nicholas fought back a grin, then gave a mock bow to Janette, allowing her to proceed him down the steps. Her bells jingled as she walked and she held her nose in the air as she followed Lacroix down the winding staircase.

Nicholas paused a moment before following them, still grinning—he fully expected to find the fortress empty, the inhabitants dead or having left long ago. But as he entered the stairway, he heard the faint call of music from the lower chambers.

Lacroix turned to grin up at him triumphantly, over his shoulder, then took Janette's hands, escorting her down the rest of the stairway. At the bottom, the bolted door was dispatched as easily as the upper. And the music flowed through the opening in a sudden, desperate flood.

Surprised, Nicholas hurried down the steps. Lacroix and Janette had been met by a woman. Her dress and cloak were crimson, the colour of fresh blood. Her eyes and upper face were hidden by a mask, but her lips were redder than the setting sun. She smiled at Nicholas over Lacroix's shoulder. "My regards, Master Lacroix. I'm glad you and your friends were able to accept my invitation."

She seemed very young, with fair skin and a fairer manner—he was almost certain he'd met her before. Lacroix bowed at the lady's welcome, then drew Janette forward. "May I present Janette. And . . . Nicholas."

The lady smiled at each of them, but her gaze lingered on Nicholas. "You're most welcome, one and all. Enjoy yourselves. Dance as you will. But I must ask that you restrain yourselves from feeding until I give my approval."

Lacroix frowned slightly, then met the woman's eyes through the laced edges of her red satin mask. "I saw no conditions on your invitation."

"But you'll do as I ask. If you wish to stay."

Janette leaned close to Lacroix. "Oh, let's stay," she whispered. "We haven't been to a party in so *long*."

He glanced at her, then smiled and nodded, relenting. "All right. We'll abide by your rules."

"My thanks." The lady moved to stand before Nicholas and held out her hand. "And will the brave knight ask his hostess to dance?"

Nicholas looked out over the dance floor, amazed. While the countryside had been laid to waste, the interior of the castle was filled to bursting with food and drink and merriment. From where they stood, he saw apartment after apartment stretch before them, each hall a different hue. The first was blue, with curtains and ornaments and appointments all of the same colour. A large brazier burned behind a blue stained-glass window, shading the dance and the dancers with azure-tinted air. Perfume floated, drowning out even the odious scent of the monk's robe and cowl in which he'd been hidden.

But the lady still held out her hand. And Nicholas took it, moving past Lacroix and Janette. They moved to find their place among the dancers—the hurried heartbeats declaring them mortals, all—and they whirled and twirled the length of the blue room. But that room turned to another of purple twilight, which gave way to the green of spring, the orange of dawn, the white of light and the violet of soft flower petals. One room led to another, each of which held a large stained glass window, the light flooding the air with colour and the musicians providing the sound.

The costumes ranged from bizarre to hideous, none having spared expense or humility for sensation. There were mortal women there wearing more provocative costumes even than Janette, and other dressed like animals or demons or beasts of the field or forest or fantasy. Nicholas felt positively mundane in his mortal, holy masquerade, dancing with the red lady in his arms.

And it was then, as they reached the last room, which seemed clothed in velvet as dark and forbidding as night, that the red lady took charge of their movements, swinging him away. And Nicholas caught no more than a glimpse of a scarlet stained-glass window before he danced back again, through the twilight and the other colours.

FOREVER

A clock began to strike the hour, continuing with each stroke, until eight bells had tolled in all. The sound stilled the dancers in their paces, the tones echoing the length and breadth of the many coloured halls. As the last chime sounded, conversation again continued and the dancers moved as they had before, missing no steps, as the musicians returned to playing.

Nicholas had paused with the others, filled with sudden dread as the clock struck. "What was that?" he asked his hostess.

She smiled prettily. "Time, sir knight. Nothing more than the passing of time."

She said no more, nor did he feel moved to press her on the point. They whirled and twirled amongst the mortals. Occasionally, he spotted Lacroix or Janette, as they, too, joined the dance. The colours played over each of them in turn. But none would pass into the dark room at the very end of the hall. At one point, he saw what he took to be the master of the fortress, Prince Prospero, pass them.

"Lady," he said softly, as they joined hands during a dance, "should you not be dancing with your lord?"

The red lady smiled at him again. "I have no lord, sir knight."

"But Prince Prospero is the master of this fortress?"

"Yes."

"And you aren't his lady-wife?"

The red lady laughed gaily and twirled beneath his arm, bowing prettily. "He is *not* my husband. So much as any man, or no man, may wed me."

And Nicholas felt the flush rise to his cheeks, as he had when he'd seen Janette in her costume earlier in the evening. "My pardon, lady," he muttered, realizing that he'd mistaken a mistress for a wife.

But the red lady continued to smile at him. "No pardon needed, sir knight. I am no man's wife. Yet I am mistress to all, in their time. Even we have met, but once. Or, more like, a cousin of mine."

Nicholas stared at her, taking her hand as he stepped toward her, moving in the dance. "A *cousin*?"

"But once," she replied, smiling cryptically. "When you became as your are, now. And once more, before the end. But for now, we dance."

And dance they did. Each hour, the clock in the dark hall chimed and the dancers froze, each time pausing for longer, as a chime was added. But the dread and terror passed and the dancers continued to dance . . . and Nicholas felt the blood hunger growing within him.

At the stroke of eleven, they were quite near the velvet room and he saw the clock. Dark, of ebony wood, it shone with a brilliant black light, the runes upon its face cast in gold and silver. And, as he gazed upon it, he felt a pressure in his brain beat unnaturally, once with each stroke, until he thought that his time was at hand.

But the red lady raised a crimson glove to his forehead, wiping away the few beads of sweat that gathered there. They disappeared, swallowed in the colour of her cloth covered hand and she leaned close to whisper, "Not for many centuries, sir knight. Don't be in such a hurry. Your time will come, in its own way."

He shivered and looked up, for Lacroix and Janette, but they were nowhere to be found. There was only the pale face and blood red lips of the red lady. Who danced only with him . . . and no other.

And then, at the first stroke of twelve, the dancers stopped again. The red lady broke from his hands and began to walk the length of the halls, leaving him beside the dark room. Nicholas desperately wanted to look into the velvet room, but he was frozen in place, as were all of the others, his eyes fixed on the back of her dress as she travelled up the length of the coloured hallways. It was at the last stroke that she reached the hallway that spoke of blue dawns and new beginnings. He could barely see her—*should* barely see her, but knew she was there as he knew the lines of his palm or the edge of his first sword.

It was time to unmask. But the mortals stood frozen in fear. And the red lady removed the satin, white-laced mask from her features.

There was blood upon her forehead and upon her lips and in her eyes. Her face was frozen with the rictus of death. As she walked back the length of the hall, the dancers screamed or cried or moaned, some falling to the floor and others to their knees, wailing for hope, for help, for God.

And still she walked, one step following another, colour after colour, light after light. Nicholas stared as she approached him and then passed him, heading toward the dark quiet of the velvet room.

Behind her, a voice cried out "Who dares?!" It was Prospero, the prince and owner of the fortress, but not the master of the revels, as he thought himself. He raced after the red lady. Almost, Nicholas reached out to him, wanting to warn him not to risk anything further. But he stilled his hand, knowing that nothing he said would stop the proud mortal. Prospero ran the length of the hall, in the path of the red lady, calling for her to stop. He met her, just at the entrance of the velvet room. And it was then that Nicholas realized that the stained glass window in the velvet room didn't match the colour of the walls and appointments, as did the other rooms. In fact, it was crimson against the black of night, and the light it cast made the room seem to swim in thick-blood red air.

But even that didn't stop Prospero. Upon reaching the red lady, he touched her shoulder. She turned, smiling her rictus grin. And with a shriek that chilled Nicholas from his boot tops to the roots of his hair, Prospero fell dead.

Nicholas knew death enough to recognize it at a glance. Prospero showed the marks of the other plague victims, his forehead covered with blood, matching the red of his lips and that which leaked from the corner of his eyes. And when the Red Death, for that was the true name of the mistress of the revels, turned her gaze to him, he felt fear in his heart.

But she smiled, the death mask gone from her face. "One hour," she whispered, in a voice as soft as silk which seemed louder than thunder. "Feed to your fill, my guests. Waste nothing."

Nicholas stared at her in horror, then turned. Lacroix was further down the hall, Janette further still. Around them were mortals—trapped by the death which they'd allowed into their midst, which had invited more death in its turn. And . . . they began to feed.

At first, Nicholas could do nothing but stand in amazement as Lacroix and Janette stalked among the shrieking and dying, their laughter drowning out the cries of death and anguish, as the plague struck. Janette kissed the lips of pretty men and beautiful woman, taking their blood with ease and grace and delight. Lacroix fed where he would, not draining any one, but tasting a little of each. And eventually, the scent of blood and death reached past the point of sanity. Nicholas felt the hunger take over him. He didn't resist, as his fangs fell into place and his eyes glowed red-gold. Greedily, he grabbed a woman and plunged his fangs into her neck, drinking what was left of her before the plague took her. But he was not done with her before he tossed her body aside and grabbed another, and yet another.

They fed that way, for the better part of an hour, taking what they would and what they could, swimming in the fear and death and terror of the place, intoxicated beyond the best of man's fermented drinks and more. The blood filled them, made them laugh and weep and dance among the fallen bodies. Until the clock struck one.

It was then that some semblance of reason returned to them. And the red lady stood before them again, her mask in place. She walked toward Nicholas, but he backed away, staring at her, then down at himself.

His monk's robe had been stained crimson from neck to hem, stiff and creaking with dried blood. As if awakening from a dream, he wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand and shuddered, then looked to the others. Lacroix's garments were much the same, the stripe of a senator hidden by the brown of dried blood. And Janette had lost many of her bells and bangles in her frenzy, contenting herself by stripping part of the gown from a mortal victim. Crouching beside a victim, she looked like one of the plague homeless or dispossessed.

"The feast is over, my guests," said the red lady, gesturing toward the steps by which they'd entered. "And although I don't mean to be ungracious—?"

She wanted them gone. And Nicholas was in no condition to argue. He backed away toward the staircase, lifting Janette to her feet as he reached her. She clung to him, eyes wide and red and full, as he led her to the steps. For a moment, only Lacroix remained. "I'm . . . not finished," he informed her, standing straight and tall and stained with more blood than he'd tasted in many months.

The red lady smiled. "Then stay, if you wish. We have room for even one of your kind. Or . . . more."

Lacroix didn't flinch, nor did he make a sound. There was no surrender, just an acceptance of the inevitable. He bowed, with more grace or elegance than Nicholas could have managed at the moment. "Our thanks, for the invitation."

In turn, the red lady bowed. "And my thanks to you, Master Lacroix. And to your friends. For accepting."

It was only then that Lacroix turned, crossing the floor to the steps with his head high, his walk stately. Once there, he hissed to Nicholas, "Fly! Fly, for all you're worth!"

They ran up the steps of the tower, flying where they could. For although night was not yet more than half-past, the fear of the dawn and of the sun and of death flooded through them. They reached the battlement, then flew for the horses, which whinnied and pawed, picking up their fear. And as they mounted their horses and turned toward their daylight refuge, the terror spurred them onward, through the forest and field, over stream and thicket, until, finally, they were safe—and sated.

Nick sat back against the couch. "So, that's it."

Natalie's eyes were wide. "That's not the story I remembered."

"But it's the truth, Or, as true as it happened." Sighing, he closed his eyes, the smell and ferocity of the blood-fest still with him. "I think—maybe we'd better do this another time."

"Uh . . . okay." When he opened his eyes, she was rising to her feet, watching him with a cautious gaze. "But, can I ask one more thing?"

Suddenly feeling very old and very weary, Nick managed a half-smile—no matter how he answered Natalie, she'd ask the question anyway. "Shoot?"

"Poe wrote the story . . . or a version of the story." "Yeah."

"And only you and Janette and Lacroix made it out, right?"

His eyes narrowed, then he looked away, knowing what was coming. "Yeah?"

"So how'd Poe find out about it? Who told him the story?"

He'd thought about the answer to the question time and again, and there was only one reply. "There *was* someone else . . . ."

Natalie's eyes widened, before she gathered up the tapes, touched his shoulder, then headed toward the elevator. Her exit was silent, befitting the moment, and its revelation.

And Nick put his feet up on the couch and stared at the ceiling, the memory of the blood and the music and the changing lights flickering in his mind, as he wondered just what it was the red lady had to say to the storyteller. And when her cousin might come to visit him for the second time, in his near-immortal lifetime, to dance, for one last time.

FOREVER

The Last Rose
by Hilary McLachlan

MARISE JOHANSSEN HAD SPENT the last 10 of her unhappy 35 years living in one of Toronto's less appealing back streets.

Her apartment was, she thought, characteristic of the monotony of her lifestyle. Its bland beige walls quivered like a long dead blancmange awakening into turbulent life with every heavy vehicle that passed by.

Any attempts to fight back against the encroaching brown boredom of her surroundings were quickly demolished. Indoor plants, guaranteed to be hardy, soon shrugged and turned down their leaves in dismay. Modern prints, so bright and cheerful in store displays, perched uncomfortably on alien walls. Nothing seemed to fit, just like herself, she thought mournfully.

Why had she ever thought she could escape the Minnesota farmlands of her childhood and make a career for herself in this Canadian city? It had seemed so right to travel north, shedding more of her past with every mile the decrepit Greyhound bus covered. Yet, what had changed? A life of fear, for a life alone. Who can say which is the worst?

Marise reflected on her former life on the farm. She'd had shelter, food, and family. Why had she thought that running away from home would give her a better life? Her mouth twisted bitterly, maybe she should have stayed amongst the cornfields and accepted the abuse. At least there she knew what to expect. Perhaps her father was right about her coming to a bad end. Was it so wrong to have wanted to go out to the movies, get a real job, or to hope love would find her? Just some brief moments of freedom was all she'd desired. But no, she was supposed to be a "good" girl and stay at home where she could make herself useful in the only way a woman could. According to her father the outside world was full of evil people, who'd all started off by disobeying their parents. All this nonsense about equality and feminism (he'd spat those words out like they were obscenities) was only putting wicked ideas into women's foolish heads.

As she thought about her mother, Marise couldn't help but cry at what she too had suffered at her father's hands. In some ways it must have been even worse for her. After all, at one time she had loved him enough to leave France as his much younger war bride, and make the long boat trip to America's foreign shores. How dashing her father had looked in those photos taken after the liberation of Paris. Marise could still remember the sound of her mother's laughter as she played the piano for them both. It was her early influence that had lead to Marise's own love of poetry. Her father had, at first, not tried

to dissuade them from their mutual appreciation of literature. Gradually, however, his overprotective behaviour towards mother and child became increasingly irrational. Then, as crops failed and debts grew, he began to spend more time drinking and less laughing. Soon he was restricting their activities to contact with their immediate neighbours. Even then he could be relied on to accuse her mother of encouraging the attentions of local farmers. Marise often thought that her mother had willed herself to die as a means of escape. If she had known, how warped grief would twist her husband's rectitude, Marise was sure her mother would have tried to endure in order to protect her daughter.

Marise smiled ironically to herself. People talked about fear of the unknown, and still went willingly to horror movies to scare themselves over popcorn and ice cream. Children were warned not to talk to strangers. Strangers! She wondered what percentage of people were hurt by actual strangers. Fear? She knew all about fear. What it was like to huddle on a bed, cramping fingers clutching a pillow to her mouth to stifle her screams, watching the door handle begin its inexorable turn. Being scared was no protection. Fear just smiled as it walked through the door.

One day she'd finally decided not to wait around for that door to open again. Her money had taken her as far as Toronto and a room at the downtown youth hostel on Church St. Years of taking care of her father's house had apparently given her no marketable skills. Waitressing for tips in an all-night diner had become her only means of support. Not bad for a temporary job, but for 10 years? It just seemed that people were so quick to categorise. Once you were safely labelled to their satisfaction, there you had to stay. They made sure of that. So, here she remained, trapped by the fear that had sent her running blindly away and afraid to reach out for companionship.

Despite her frantic escape from her father's wrath, Marise felt that her new life in Toronto was scant improvement on her old. After several weeks as a waitress she had managed to find this down-trodden apartment close to her work. She had hoped to save up enough tips to move to a more salubrious and safer area. Empty dreams of a better job had kept her going for the first year. After that she realised that she could not take the only apparent way out and become a prostitute. Soon she became resigned to her life. After all, she had her self respect, if nothing else. Apart from going to work, Marise's only outings were to the local store for groceries. It was no wonder that her mind was never on her surroundings as she walked to and fro from work.

On a blustery February night, Marise wrapped her petite form in her old battered wool schoolcoat and stepped out of the comforting warmth of the diner. It had been a long shift, and she was exhausted. As her fingers flinched from the cold she swore impatiently. Damn, her gloves were almost worn through and she didn't have money enough for new ones. This time of year, the tips were worse than usual. She shrugged in bitter resignation as she moved out into the street. As she trudged through the dark and fetid alleys that provided a quicker shortcut to her apartment than any TTC bus, she thought that any passerbys would probably consider her mad if they heard her muttering obscure French verses to herself. Her poetry recitations had become one way of keeping her mind off her problems. What she needed was a prince to rescue her from the drudgery. Marise laughed at that childish wish, and then stood watching her breath magically form a cloud in front of her. At first she didn't see the tall figure that stood watching her resume her walk. However, as she drew closer, even her mortal eyes were able to pierce the darkness that cloaked the man. She stumbled in fright, and then relaxed as he moved into the dim light of a street lamp. It was only the punk-tressed transient that she had seen on her route for the past few nights. At least she hadn't been forced to those straights she thought with a touch of pity. Marise stopped and fumbled in her purse as the man glided backwards in surprise. Astonished at her own actions she reached out and closed his cold fingers around a crumpled bill that she could ill afford to spare. She smiled gently at him before continuing on her lonely way.

The next day Marise shuffled her plants around in the vain hope of encouraging their resurrection. She knew better than to hope for happiness, all she asked now was some peace, and a little beauty in her surroundings. Maybe that too, was out of her reach. Nothing ever changed she thought dispiritedly as she pulled her neatly pressed uniform over her head. Reaching for her only luxury, a discounted bottle of her mother's favourite perfume - 4711, Marise allowed herself one discrete dab of eau de toilette. The light fragrance gave her the brief emotional boost necessary to carry her out the door.

As she stepped back to lock her door Marise caught sight of a slender florist's box placed upright against the wall of the poorly lit corridor. Marise glanced quickly around but there was no one in sight. Tentatively she reached out to touch the silver box. There was no mistake, the envelope was addressed to her. Gathering the box into her suddenly trembling arms, Marise moved back into her apartment. For several minutes she just sat looking at the box as it lay on her ugly foldout table, much too elegant for its drab surroundings. Marise rubbed her hands, trying to dispel the nervous anticipation that threatened to overpower her, and slipped the lid from the box. She inhaled sharply with delight as a single red rose was revealed. It was perfection, its petals still misted with dew. Marise reached out eagerly to caress the rose, and then guiltily dropped her hands as the petals caught on her work roughened fingers. Slowly she withdrew the card from the envelope to read a single French verse:

Mignonne, allons voir si la rose,
Qui ce matin avait declose
Sa robe de pourpre au soleil,
A point perdu cette vespree
Les plis de sa robe pourpree,
Et son teint au votre pareil.

Marise drew in a sharp breath of amazement. Anyone who could quote Pierre de Ronsard's 'A Cassandre' so aptly, was a man after her own heart. She translated the verse silently to herself:

Dearest, let us go to see if the rose,
which this morning unfolded
its crimson robe to the sun,
has already this evening
lost the folds of its robe,
and its blush so like your own.

Her cheeks coloured in delicate response as she wondered who could know of her secret delight in romantic literature. Lovingly she placed the rose in water, and departed reluctantly for work.

A fresh red rose, each accompanied by a different note, greeted Marise every morning after that. As a result Marise began to frequent the local library en route to work. With the help of an empathetic (if somewhat envious) librarian she managed to locate the sources of each of the poetic messages. Marise's formerly solemn face continued to soften with bemused wonderment, as each new tribute (from Horace's *'Leave winter's rose where on the tree, It hangs belated'*; to an anonymous Greek verse *'Short-lived the rose's bloom, and when 'tis gone, seeking, no rose thou'lt find but only thorns'* from the Anthologia Graeca) was translated. Her mundane environment no longer impinged on her consciousness, as her inner fantasies surrounded her.

As Valentine's Day dawned Marise fidgeted nervously inside her apartment. What if, today of all days, the roses stopped coming? All the doubts she had been firmly repressing deep in her subconscious came jostling to the surface. An image of her father's livid face came suddenly to mind and her body tensed with apprehension. Then, she forced herself to relax. No, her father was incapable of both the subtlety, and the literary references to be responsible for this. Perhaps, it was just someone's idea of a sick joke. She mentally ran through the pitifully small list of her workmates and acquaintances. How could she begin to suspect any one of them? Marise shook her head, this had all been like a foolish romantic dream. She hadn't wanted to examine it too closely for fear that it would shatter, like a tropical flower too fragile for cold reality.

Marise walked timidly towards the door, she had to see what was there for better or worse. She grimaced, what an expression— just like marriage vows. Keeping the security chain on, she tentatively opened the door. Despite her doubts, her face sagged with disappointment at the lack of the familiar metallic box. Unlatching the chain she rashly pulled the door fully open and peered out into the corridor.

Suddenly she smiled with relief as she spotted an imposing package placed to one side. It was emblazoned with the name of a well-known and extremely exclusive shop. Eyes sparkling, Marise swept the gift back inside. An hour later she was still sitting stunned on the floor surrounded by discarded wrapping paper. Draped carefully over her cheap furniture was a luxurious dark mink coat and a sophisticated white evening gown. The note still clutched in her hand read:

Why is it no one ever sent me yet
One perfect limousine do you suppose?
Ah no, its always just my luck to get
One perfect rose.

On the back was written:

My chauffeur will pick you up at 7 tonight.

Marise had no doubt that she would go. Her unknown admirer might be dictatorial, but his sense of humour was evidenced by his use of Dorothy Parker's caustic wit, besides, this was her chance to fly free at long last. Her mind made up, Marise ran down the stairs and begged the use of the Super's phone to call in sick. She spent the rest of the day in a hectic daze of preparations. By 6pm she was standing nervously in one place, afraid that any untoward movement on her part would damage her glorious apparel. Confused suppositions ran through her head. What would he be like? More to the point, who was he? Just when she thought her heart would burst with delicious tension, Marise was startled by a circumspect knock at the door. Taking a deep breath she went out to meet her appointed destiny.

As she accompanied the reserved chauffeur to the limousine, Marise could not resist a satisfied smile from flashing across her countenance. All the neighbours were absolutely killing themselves trying to catch a better glimpse of what was going on. She managed to sweep past them in a suitably dignified and blase manner. The chauffeur drew open the rear doors and gestured for her to enter the dark interior. Marise self-consciously arranged her garments and relaxed back against the leather upholstery. A sudden burst of light opposite her revealed an elegantly dressed gentleman. He leant forward and smiled to dispel her discomfort.

"Thank you for honouring me with your company this evening," he purred urbanely as he touched the flame to the tip of his cigar. "I hope you didn't think it too forward of me to impose on you this way. After all, we haven't been officially introduced."

Marise surprised herself with her poise as she replied, "It was my pleasure. Actually, we still haven't been introduced."

"Allow me to rectify the omission. My name is Lacroix, and you of course are Marise Johanssen."

As he reached out cooly to kiss her hand Marise could not help her shudder of delighted excitement. "Yes, I am Marise. Forgive me, but I don't think we have ever met? I was wondering why you wanted to send me all the beautiful roses, and these?" she queried, waving her hand over her dress and coat.

"I wanted to thank you for your compassion and charity," Lacroix explained softly. "It isn't often that people extend help towards outsiders."

Marise looked confused as she enquired, "I helped you? But I've never seen you before today. I would have remembered meeting someone like you."

Lacroix's face lightened with a curious grin he said, "What about the tramp you gave the money to last week?"

"That was you? But," she stuttered, "you look so different."

"I was exploring new territory," Lacroix answered, "and look what I found."

Marise flushed with embarrassment. "I'm nobody," she declared. "I'm just a waitress."

"*Ma chere*, no one is just anything. Every human has value. One just has to delve a little deeper to reach it in some people." Lacroix tapped on the closed partition to signal the driver.

As the automobile cruised smoothly away from her building Marise decided not to question her good fortune any longer. She dimpled at her companion as he offered her a crystal goblet of red wine to savour during the journey.

Marise turned bemused eyes on her escort as the vehicle swept to a genteel halt in front of the Roy Thompson Hall. "The Toronto Symphony," she breathed, glowing with excited anticipation.

"I think you'll enjoy the programme," Lacroix explained as he brushed aside their chauffeur to hand her out of the limousine. "It features Vivaldi, Grieg, and Johann Strauss."

"I love it already," Marise beamed, allowing him to guide her inside the magnificent rose-petal-shaped auditorium where she stood transfixed at the sight of the heavens reflected through the glass canopy high above their heads.

It had been an enchanted night, Marise thought later that evening. Glancing sideways at her distinguished companion, she couldn't believe her good fortune at meeting a man so in tune with her deepest feelings.

Lacroix drew her closer as he suggested, "Perhaps you would like to end the evening with supper? I've heard that the Guild Inn is imbued with a wonderful ambience."

Marise agreed eagerly. Like Juliet, she did not want this night to end.

Lacroix dismissed the chauffeur on their arrival at the Inn. "I think we can manage by ourselves for the remainder of the evening," he said as Marise turned aside to conceal her blushes.

"Why don't we go for a stroll through the grounds first?" Lacroix queried, not waiting for a response as he led her away from the lights.

Yielding to persuasion, Marise welcomed his arm around her as he pointed out the various architectural curiosities arranged throughout the 90 acre retreat. At the rear of the property the gardens ended abruptly at the edge of the Scarborough Bluffs. Marise surrendered languidly to Lacroix's embrace as they stood looking down at Lake Ontario 200 feet below their feet.

"You're frozen," she exclaimed with concern as his icy lips caressed her cheek.

"Warm me," he demanded bleakly, eyes suddenly lit from within as his fangs descended to her throat.

Some moments later Lacroix bent down and laid a white rose tenderly upon Marise's quiescent breast. "Theocritus once said: *'Fair is the rose, yet time will wither it.'* He was wrong."

Tara '93

White Christmas
by Tara O'Shea

NICK OPENED THE elevator and stared.

"What is that." It was a statement, not a question.

"It's a Christmas tree, Knight. What's the matter, haven't you ever seen one before?"

"Of course I've seen— Schanke, what is it doing *in my home?*"

"I thought it was time to decorate this place." Nat smiled cheerfully, opening up the carton of decorations she had carted over from home. "It's Christmas."

"I know it's Christmas, Nat..." He ran to catch a lamp that Schanke nearly tipped over as he lugged the tree through the living room.

"Good thing we brought a stand. Nick, you got a screwdriver?"

"Kitchen drawer."

"Good, hold this thing."

"You're getting pine needles all over my floor."

"Poor baby," Nat stuck her tongue out. "We figured you'd be the real tree type. Those fake ones are so tacky."

"Hey, Myra loves ours! We never need to drop fifty bucks yearly for something that's going to die in a few weeks anyway."

"So you dropped fifty bucks on my account instead?"

"Are you kidding? See, Myra's cousin's kid is working at a tree lot over his school break—"

"I get the picture."

"Smile, Nick." Nat handed him a red ball with a hook sticking out of it. "Start decorating."

* * *

"I can't believe it." Nat sat back, staring at the tree with all its lights in the corner, a splash of rich colour in the customary gloom of the warehouse.

"I'm not sure I do either." Nick shook his head. Schanke had hurried home to help Myra and Jenny put together and decorate their own tree, and so it was just the two of them. He reached for the remote and Nat grinned as there was suddenly a fire in the hearth.

"All we need now is chestnuts. Are you mad at me?"

"No. I just haven't celebrated Christmas in so long... You took me by surprise."

"Yeah, well, that's my job. Mortals do this stuff. It's time you got back into the swing of things too. Do you have any Christmas movies? I could make an egg nog flavoured protein shake."

"I'll pass on the shake, but I think I have *White Christmas* around here someplace."

Nat bounced off the couch and over to the video cabinet. She whistled lowly. "You have every Danny Kaye movie ever made!"

"I liked Danny Kaye."

* * *

Chicago
April 1954

"Oh Nickolah, they're so tiresome!"

"I'm fascinated by the pictures," Nick grinned, his breath fogging a bit in the night air on State street. The marquee on the theatre proclaimed loudly the Premiere of *White Christmas*.

"What on earth is 'vistavision'?" Janette remarked, annoyed as the letters over the technicolour Paramount mountain proclaimed *White Christmas* the first ever film presented in the new format.

"I have no idea. Don't talk through the film, it's rude."

Janette glared first at Nick, then the screen, and settled back for a two hours of musical numbers.

She hated musicals.

She hated Bing Crosby.

She wasn't sure if she hated Danny Kaye yet.

They exited the theatre with all the other couples and families onto back onto State, where he hailed a taxi.

"Why did you subject me to that?"

"Danny Kaye," he said, as if that explained anything at all.

"Hmmfhh." Janette looked at him, trying to figure out what had come over him. "It's just a mortal. Why the sudden zeal?"

"A kid in one of my classes was raving about him, I guess the mood is just infectious."

"You'll miss them when you have to move on."

"Maybe I won't have to."

"Nickolah, as limited as mortals are, I'm sure they will begin to notice that you do not age."

"Well, that gives me at least a decade, right? Do you want to go for a carriage ride?" He asked as the taxi neared the lit Water Tower buildings where the horse drawn carriages queued around the block.

"If you like, Nickolah."

* * *

"Nick?" Nat touched his shoulder.

"Hmm?"

"You looked like you were a million miles away."

"Oh, I was just remembering the first time I saw this movie."

"Did it open at Christmas?"

"Actually, it was April."

"A Christmas movie that opened in April? That's the silliest thing I ever heard."

"That's Hollywood for you." He leaned back, his attention focused on the screen as the "Snow" number started.

* * *

FOREVER

Chicago
Christmas eve, 1954

Nick stared up at the marquee, remembering.

White Christmas, a special holiday presentation in VistaVision.

"You haven't kept the holidays, Professor Girard, in decades," Janette reminded him, wondering why on earth Nick had dragged her out into the night streets when they were teaming with families and shoppers. "Why start now?"

It was so noisy, so gaudy, with the cheap lights strung among the trees. Nick ignored her, following the crowd as they *oohed* and *ahhhed* over the decorated windows of Marshall Fields and Carson's.

"You should have left the city, after having your picture in the paper. Very sloppy, my dear." Janette was wearing her customary black, a raven out of place among the green and red of the season.

"I was really doing some good, really teaching..."

"Well, wait a few generations, and you can always start again."

"You don't understand."

"No, I suppose I don't."

"When I was a little boy, Christmas was a grand affair." It began to snow, and while the mortals in their layers of wool and cotton began to shiver, Nick seemed unaware. "We sometimes almost fasted for weeks so that we could have a real feast. Roasted fowl and meat, in the dead of winter no less, sometimes even sugar imported from Spain."

"My."

"Don't sound so blasé, it was very expensive. But it was more than that... Christmas meant something to me then, not just religious, not just the gifts... It was something more, or maybe all of it together. But not any more."

"Nickolah—"

"But look at them," he gestured to the children staring at wonder at the animatronics in the windows, the adults eating hot pretzels and popcorn from the carts along the wide street. "They can still feel something."

"The season does something to you, you've become positively maudlin." Janette frowned. "Nickolah, obviously the loss of your teaching position has depressed you. Don't take it so hard, another opportunity will present itself. You can always come to my club...."

"You and your club..."

"I run an excellent club, everyone who is anyone knows that." She pretended indignace, and they continued over Washington, towards the lake.

* * *

Nick stared at the tree, its white lights peeking out between green branches and red balls. The sun would be down soon, and he had the day off. In the past, he had spent Christmas wandering the city, just watching everyone. This year, there were two packages under the tree, and Nat was coming over to open presents any minute.

He didn't know quite what he was feeling.

There were no carollers singing in the streets any longer, not in his neighbourhood at least. There hadn't been for many years, yet he still thought he could hear music if he listened hard enough. The smell of woodsmoke from somewhere nearby made him think about lighting a fire in his own hearth, but he didn't move off the couch.

Maybe Christmas was different this year. He had friends, an extended family who cared about him. Maybe that was what made this Christmas feel so different from all the past Decembers. No looming spectre of dread in the form of Lacroix to jump out of the shadows, no mocking laughter to drown out the sounds of church bells and singing.

He wondered what Janette would do this evening, with her club emptied by the holiday. Perhaps the younger vampires like Alma still celebrated, perhaps they were having a small party with blood instead of eggnog. That thought amused him, and he wondered how Janette would deal with such a thing.

The intercom buzzed, and he padded over to the monitor. He was greeted to a view of Nat and two shopping bags.

"What's all this?"

"Dinner for me, and some presents for you. They got dropped off at the station."

"Come on up, I just need to get dressed."

"You're still in your jammies?"

"No jokes. I just woke up."

* * *

"What's in this one?" Nick picked up one of the packages Nat had arranged beneath the tree, "It's heavy."

"You're just like a kid." Nat laughed, curling up on the couch. "That one's from Niamh."

Nick laughed as he removed the silver and red paper, unearthing a tin of very expensive Irish whiskey. "'*To replace the bottle I used to drown my sorrows. I hope you use it to toast to joy.*' That girl.... I should call her."

"She's spending the holidays with friends in London, but she said she'd be back for New Year's." Nat handed him the next package. "This one's from The Li's. You remember them..."

"The family in the station, that night we all got held hostage."

"No, I got held hostage, you played hero. Very well, may I add."

"It's a cook book." Nick raised a brow.

"Well, now I know what to get you next year. A wok."

"Very funny. Who's the next one from?"

"Um... lemme see," She pulled another present from under the tree. "Lisa Cooper."

"That crazy munchkin, what did she get me?" He laughed as he discovered a box set of paperbacks. "*The Books of Blood*, by Tanya Huff?"

"Don't look at me, I've never read them."

"You don't suppose Lisa knows more than she should?"

"I wouldn't put it past her."

"We'll have to have a little talk with our favourite moppet after the holidays. Who's next?"

"Schanke."

"Well, it's too small to be another bottle of Scotch." Nick shook the box, and Nat laughed. "Oh no."

"Oh yes, it's that shape of a box."

"It's a tie, isn't it."

"Go on, open it. Only one way to tell."

"Maybe we'll save this one for last."

"Oh no you don't, you have you do these in order." Nat removed the card, and Nick undid the paper. He groaned as he opened the box. Nestled inside was a very, very loud tie. Tropical birds in florescent colours among bright green leaves against a black background. It vied with the tree for colour in his flat.

"'*Worship the Goddess Chroma, and give up all that black. Love, Don.*'" Nat read aloud, a sparkle in her eyes.

"This is going to live in my drawer for a long, long time." Nick closed the box to avoid being blinded.

"Oh I don't know, it's not all that bad."

"And I thought you had taste."

Nat collapsed in giggles, and then blinked as Nick presented her with a large flat present. "What's this?"

FOREVER

"Your Christmas present."

Nat carefully removed the bright coloured paper, and gasped. "Nick, it's beautiful!" In rich reds and purples, the sun rose over the Toronto skyline. She ran her fingers over the brush strokes, following the impressionistic swirls of clouds. "When did you...?"

"I've been working on it downstairs in the studio for a month or so, trying to imagine it, picturing how the clouds would look, how the sun would look. And maybe, just maybe, with your help, someday I'll know again."

"Hey, not just someday. Someday soon, I promise. Now I feel guilty, because I didn't get you anything as nice."

"Don't be silly. It came from you, that's all I care about." He picked up the last package. "It's heavy."

He unwrapped it and gaped. "A blender? You bought me a new *blender?*"

"Well, your old one looks like it's from the 1950s, and I see a lot of protein shakes in your future, at least until we can start using it to make real egg nog to go with a real Christmas dinner."

"I guess it's the thought that counts." Nick placed the blender on the kitchen counter, and Nat began unpacking her groceries. "And it's a lovely thought." He came up behind her and gave her an unexpected hug.

"What's that for?"

"Just wishing you a happy Christmas."

Tarver
'93

A Woman's Work

by Susan M. Garrett

KNOWING THAT NICK wouldn't be off shift for another twenty minutes, Natalie figured her timing to be perfect. Entering the loft, she flicked on the lights and carried her two brown paper bags into the kitchen. Once her purse,coat, and mittens had been draped over a chair, she unpacked the bag of salad fixings and dinner—she'd brought enough for two on the faint hope that she could con Nick into eating *something*—placing all of the food in the refrigerator and the cupboards.

The second bag, however, contained nastier stuff. She wrinkled her nose as she removed the cleanser, paper towels, rubber gloves and other cleaning paraphernalia. Nick had a habit of dumping his bottle dregs down the sink, which played hell with the stainless steel. Even if the stench didn't seem to bother him, it was driving *her* nuts. And cleaning up dried blood was something she didn't particularly feel comfortable doing with a full-fledged vampire around.

She was about ten minutes into the job when she heard the lift door open. Pushing her hair back from her face with a rubber gloved hand and leaving a trail of white cleanser across her forehead, she stepped back from the sink. "I'm sorry, Nick, I didn't think you'd be home this—"

He was tall, with blond hair that moved way past that end of the spectrum, into the 'gleaming white' zone. His eyes were light and large, commanding. And something about his grin and his stance told her that he was anything but mortal.

"You're not Nick."

"How astute." He walked past her, then around her, looking over the bags, the sink, and her, with a sweeping gaze. "And how domestic. Nick's a lucky vampire. I assume I have the pleasure of addressing the lovely Dr.Lambert?

Natalie moved to cross her arms, then realized the last thing she wanted was cleanser all over her tweed jacket—she'd been stupid not to have taken it off with her coat. She met his smile with a frank stare. "You must be Lacroix."

"As I said, astute." He backed up to the cabinets and seated himself on the countertop, legs dangling. "You know who I am. You must know why I'm here?"

She shook her head sadly. "From what Nick's told me of your past history and how you've tormented him for the last eight-hundred-odd years, my guess would be you're here to torment him again."

If possible, Lacroix's grin grew wider. "Ah, his taste's finally improved—lovely *and* intelligent. I'm impressed—you're a far cry from his usual doxy."

"And you're in a bit of a rut. Why don't you find somebody else to torment?"

"Actually," said Lacroix, inspecting the invisible dirt beneath his fingernails, "I'm here to finish it. You're right—Nick's become rather a bore. And after this last attempt to do me in, you can't say I don't have a right to be... cross with him?"

Groaning, Natalie shook her head again. Lifting the cleanser can, she poured more into the sink and returned to scrubbing, ignoring him.

This didn't seem to sit well with Lacroix. After a moment, he leaned across the counter, almost nose-to-nose with her. "My news doesn't disturb you?"

"What disturbs *me* is what blood does to stainless steel." Pausing again and glaring at a stubborn stain, she met his eyes. "Nick never was that observant when it came to these things, but . . . did you ever have this problem with porcelain?"

Lacroix blinked, looking down at the stain, then back at her. "I can't say that I ever noticed, either."

"Perfect memory my a—," muttered Natalie, beneath her breath. Attacking the stain with renewed vigour, she added, "I suppose it's to be expected—it sounds like you're not the type to clean up his own messes. I'd ask Janette, but she doesn't seem all that domestic."

"And you are?" asked Lacroix.

Deciding she wouldn't take the note of disbelief in his tone as an insult, Natalie gave him a wan smile. "No. Not really. The best I can manage is to keep things neat, just to make life a little easier. A family habit."

"Then, you come from a family of domestic servants? Because I do have a dreadful tear in my jacket, from my last encounter with Nicholas...."

That almost got under her skin. Throwing the scrubbing pad back into the sink, she glared at him. "You *are* evil, aren't you?"

He smiled modestly, touching his hand to his chest in a humble manner. "Well, one *tries*, doesn't one?"

Sighing again, she put her hands on her hips, tweed coat be damned. "I'll have you know I come from a long line of medical professionals."

Lacroix slipped from the countertop, facing her. "It's nice to see you take such pride in your work. And it does my heart no end of good to know that your family has admitted they posed a danger to the continuing health of mortals. You've finally found your niche in dealing with patients you can't kill—they're already dead."

"Oh, we're used to that." Natalie sighed and turned back to her bag of cleaning supplies. "I suppose you'll be going, now that Nick isn't here. Don't let me keep you."

"Ah, Dr. Lambert, that's so inhospitable. Surely you wouldn't send me away without offering me some refreshment. Coffee, tea . . . or thee?"

She felt his hands slip around her neck, beneath her hair. He wasn't strangling her, just trying to frighten her. Nick said Lacroix had always enjoyed playing with this food.

"I'd really hoped this wouldn't be necessary," Natalie said sadly.

"I'm afraid that it is. But you'll like the night, I promise you. And you'll enjoy all the lovely little things I can teach you—"

His lips brushed against her throat. There wasn't time to talk or reason. Natalie reached into the bag and grabbed the bottle of chopped garlic, flipping open the cap and tossing it directly into Lacroix's face.

His hands left her throat and he roared, hissing and sputtering. Before he could get too far, she opened one of the lower kitchen cabinet drawers and pulled out the meat mallet and sharp wooden stake. With a well placed lunge and swing, she managed to drive the stake into him.

Blinded, Lacroix didn't know what hit him. He fell backward, still wiping at the fragments of garlic that clung to him, then stared with disbelief at the wooden stake that protruded partially from his chest.

Spitting on her hands, Natalie got a better grip on the mallet and changed from a straight hammer move to a golf swing, shifting the stake up through the space between his ribs and into his heart.

FOREVER

Lacroix's head struck the countertop as he fell. His amber eyes were still open as he hit the floor and he writhed, nails clawing at the stake in his chest. Natalie stood over him, frowning. "You're a tough bastard to kill, you know that? But my great-great granddad always said that the older they are, the tougher they are."

His lips mouthed a question she couldn't quite make out. Natalie gestured toward the mallet in her hands. "Oh, this? Hey, I'm not stupid. You spend any time with a guy, you know he's gonna make a move on you sooner or later. Always good to carry protection—never know when he might be a little *too* carried-away-by-the-moment, if you know what I mean." Knowing enough to keep out of the reach of his arms, she leaned back to deliver the coup de grace, gaining momentum with her swing. "Once a Van Helsing, always a Van Helsing," she declared, as she struck the stake head clean and square, just as she'd been taught as a child.

Lacroix shrieked—the endless, pitiful shriek that had always brought a tear to her grandmother's eyes—then fell limp. But Natalie wasn't fooled. She knew the drill. And she almost thought she saw a flicker of fear beneath those phoney closed eyelids as she raised the meat cleaver and decapitated him.

Sitting back on her haunches, she watched as he fell into dust, then sighed. At least there hadn't been *too* much blood this time. But she'd have to give the floor a quick mop before she left . . . she'd have felt odd walking through the kitchen and knowing there might be bits of Lacroix still underfoot. And Nick did have a tendency to walk around in bare feet.

Natalie grimaced at the thought, but at least it gave her an idea. By the time the elevator door opened and Nick stepped into the loft, the blood was gone and she was on the kitchen floor on her knees, sweeping up the rest of Lacroix into a dustpan.

Nick stopped when he saw her, then looked around quickly. "Nat—what happened?"

"What?" she asked innocently, wiping back her hair with a rubber gloved hand.

It was a calculated move and it worked. He smiled at the domesticity of the gesture. "I told you, you're not a maid. I don't want you cleaning up."

"And I told *you*," she countered, as he placed a hand on her arm and helped her rise to her feet, "that if I'm going to be preparing food in this kitchen, for *me*, I want to make damn sure I don't get ptomaine." Slipping away from him, she quickly dumped the remains from the dust pan into the trash compactor, then turned on the tap to wash the grit out of the sink.

"What's this?" asked Nick, peeking into the paper bag she'd left on the kitchen table.

"That's your part of the job, if you don't mind?"Natalie offered him a shy smile. "There's ice an inch thick on the front walk, near where I parked. I nearly slipped on it coming it. It just needs something for traction, so I figured a little ash wouldn't hurt."

"As my lady commands," said Nick, holding the bag to his chest and bowing gallantly. He started out the door, then took another look in the bag. "Anyone I know?"

"Could be."

Chuckling under his breath, he headed for the elevator doors. And Natalie returned to her second cleansing of the kitchen sink, mourning the loss of the garlic—there was nothing like it to thin blood. Singing "You take the high road and I'll take the low road," lightly to herself, she consoled herself with the fact that she could scratch off one more thing from her 'to do' list.

FILE #1027
Compiled by Joseph Dawson from field notes (see attachments)

Last updated: 02/18/94

NAME: Niamh O'Brien (Niamh Ní Bhriain)
BORN: in Co. Wicklow, Ireland approx. 1073 BCE

FIRST REPORTED ENCOUNTER WITH FELLOW IMMORTAL:

Found by Himiko (clan name unknown, age unknown, current location unknown) in 1103 BCE. (see attached notes from field agents Purcell and Carnegy re: Himiko, also see FILE #376)

Background:

Met Darius (SEE DARIUS, FILE #432) in January, 1107.

Spent time in a convent circa 1223 BCE (abbey records confirm a novice of her description being placed there by an uncle, assumed to be Darius). Encountered Victor (see file #1098).

Himiko and Niamh separated in 1585 BCE, not to meet again until 1987. (see archives 1500-1700 BCE)

May, 1993 Himiko is killed.
(see attached field notes from agents Purcell, and Mitchell)

KNOWN QUICKENINGS:

1. 1180: Chrestien d'Anjou (103 years old)
2. 1585: Anna Drake (211)
3. 1781: Justin Matthews (87)
4. 1784: Christina Matthews (??)
5. 1867: Mick O'Leary (412)
6. 1984: "Julian DeStefano" aka Paul Camaletti (543)
7. 1986: "Sylvia Huan" aka Jade (267)
8. 1989: Thomas Jones (611)
9. 1993: "Martine Phillips" aka Felice Martin (??)

FILE STATUS: OPEN

FILE

cc: James Horton

Field Report
Attn: Joseph Dawson
cc: James Horton

FILE

From: [redacted]
Date: [redacted]

Followed subject (Himiko) to Toronto. Subject was travelling with another Immortal, Martine Phillips aka Felice Martin (See file #2087).

Martin challenged Himiko in an alley off of Yonge St. Police investigation precluded retrieving the body. Dec. Knight and Schanke involved. CONFIRM file #376 now CLOSED.

Martin challenged O'Brien (exact details unknown). Martine's body was retrieved by Toronto Police at 101 Gateway Lane. Due to investigation, was unable to claim the body, but CONFIRM Martin lost her head. File #2087 now CLOSED.

FILE

ADDENDUM:

Personal Log, re: file #1027

Joe, you've known me a long time, and I'm not one to make stuff up. After all I've seen, I have no right to say what I'm about to tell you sounds crazy, but I swear on my mama's grave, Joe. It's all true. Every last word. Please don't let the council kick me out on this one, I didn't hallucinate a thing.

Niamh O'Brien is an immortal, we've always known that. but I think a Dec. Nicholas Knight of the Toronto PD needs to be investigated. I did some digging, and this guy has done a real good job of setting up an identity. Birth certificate, diplomas, addresses, the works. But none of it checks out. It holds up to a surface background check, but I did some digging, and some digging, and there is something not copacetic about this guy.

I found 7 photographs spanning the last hundred years in city archives in Toronto, Chicago, San Francisco and London. Some of them are pretty old and fuzzy, but I swear it's the same guy, not just family resemblance. A Nicholas Girard made the papers in Chicago in '54, and I got a birth certificate on him, but no death certificate. Also, a Nicholas Girard, and Nicholas Knight both owned a theatre on Devon for thirty years. Same address, but no one has lived there for about four years. And the warehouse on Gateway in Toronto has been owned by a Michael Brabant before Knight 'bought' it in 1970.

We are talking about a guy who would have been in grade school buying property. Also, according to his records, he's permanently assigned to the night shift because of a severe allergy to sunlight. How the hell did this guy make it through the academy? I'm an ex-cop, I know this has to be a front.

I think this guy may be someone to be watched. Niamh O'Brien killed Felice Martin in this guy's apartment, in front of WITNESSES, Joe. Not one of them reported anything out of the ordinary, except for an electrical short. You and I both know you can't cover up what happens when these people kill each other, not even with the best of lies.

I know I'll probably get kicked out for this, but I just had to make my report. Mitch is keeping an eye on Niamh, I spoke to him Thursday. You might want to call him. See you in Paris.

We'll Always Have Paris

By Tara O'Shea

"SO WHAT DO WE KNOW about Darius's friend?" Richie trailed after Duncan through the baggage claim, feeling absurdly like an errand boy, though he knew full well Darius couldn't have come and picked her up himself.

"I spoke with Niamh a few days ago. She's having a rough time right now. She lost an old friend."

"Old friend, huh? My kind of old friend, or your kind of old friend?"

"Niamh's older than I am by about five hundred years."

"Ah." Richie began scanning the crowds of arriving and departing travellers. "Do we have any idea what she looks like?'

"Darius said she is small, with dark hair and blue eyes."

"Small?"

"Yeah. You know, fine-boned."

"You mean, short."

"Yes, Richie. Short." Duncan rolled his eyes. "Besides, I'll know which one she is." He never thought he would be glad of the specific nature of immortality until he had to identify another immortal in an airport terminal.

* * *

Niamh shouldered the sword case, grinning. Despite the long flight, jet lag, and customs, she was too excited by the prospect of seeing Darius again after so long to feel any of it. The buzz hit her head on and her grin widened as she looked about for MacLeod.

She recognised him from the pony-tail and the jacket, just as Darius had described. He caught her eye and waved her over.

"MacLeod," She shook his hand warmly. "It's good to finally meet you."

"This is Richie." Duncan presented the boy and she shook his hand as well.

"It's a pleasure...." Richie hesitated, not quite sure what to call her.

"Niamh. Corrine is on holiday and only the customs fellows know she's even here." She winked and the boy relaxed. He grabbed one of the suitcases, as did MacLeod, and they made their way towards the parking lot.

"So how long are you staying?" Duncan asked as they deposited her bags in the trunk.

"I'm on to Osaka in ten days. Until then, I'm going to do the tourist routine. It's been quite some time since I've wandered Paris."

"How long?" Richie couldn't hold his curiosity in check.

"Oh my, a century at least. No, wait, more than that. I've lost track, really. Thank goodness for telephones, I don't know how I survived without them."

Duncan chuckled. When they had last spoken, Niamh had been in the midst of tracking her mentor's killer. She had not been as cheerful, nor as talkative. It was nice to know that some of his kind seemed capable of bouncing back. Death was never something one got used to, no matter how long one lived.

They piled into the Citroen and Niamh suddenly smiled.

"I know your kinsman. Russell Nash, *indeed*." She laughed at the psuedonym. "It was completely by accident, we were both bidding at the same auction in Vermont years ago. '76 I think."

"The Muramasa dai-sho?"

"Yes, and he got them, the bastard. We scared the hell out of one another. Anyway, I'm on my way to Osaka next, to go through Himiko's effects. There is something terrible about being a scavenger. Living off of other people's memories. But, antiques are our business, the easiest avenue for me in any case."

"Where are you from?" Richie leaned forward from the back seat.

"Ireland."

"You don't sound Irish."

"Well, that was several hundred years ago. I sound about as Irish as MacLeod here sounds Scots."

"Hey!"

"Oh please, you sound like a Beeb newsreader." Niamh laughed. "We're all that way, when we get old enough. Put us somewhere and we'll fall into the local accent soon or late. Toronto is a bit tricky, you run into all kinds there. My slight whatever-it-is accent pretty much goes unnoticed." They pulled in front of the George V and Niamh smiled.

"Ah, Paris." She sighed at the sumptuous lobby, smiling widely.

"I wish I could afford to stay here," Richie mumbled, shouldering one of her bags as they traipsed through the lobby. Duncan chuckled.

Entering her suite, Niamh stopped short at the vase of roses, a slow smile creeping across her face.

"Let's go to the Church."

* * *

Darius looked up from his desk, eyes shining. The heavy wooden door to his chamber swung open, revealing Niamh and Duncan.

"*Cheri*," Darius got to his feet and Niamh laughed, clasping his hands warmly.

"*Cher*."

"I am so sorry about Himiko."

"Yes, well, no one else will be fooled by—"

"Richie, why don't you head back to the barge?" Duncan grinned and Richie started. "Tessa will probably be wondering what's keeping us."

"Yeah, okay."

"Take the car. I'll walk."

Richie looked confused but got the feeling that Duncan wanted him gone. So he went. He wasn't going to press it. Weird stuff always seemed to happen when they were visited by old friends, although they were usually Mac's old friends, not Darius's.

* * *

"Would you like some wine?" Darius produced a carafe. "Or mead?"

"Mead. I have no head for wine." Niamh smiled, eyes bright.

"Ah, but you have a stomach for whiskey," Darius pointed out, all innocence as he removed a bottle from his cupboard and filled her cup.

"This is very true." She laughed gaily, taking a sip. "Your mead, however, is still a joy. I've missed it, you know I have no brewster's touch no matter how hard my teachers tried." She tapped the rim of her cup and Darius topped it up with the amber liquid.

"Sister Coralie." Darius savoured the name and Niamh's laughter was like the chimes of silver bells, but with a wicked edge. "Poor Sister Coralie."

"You got her drunk."

"Well, you helped."

"The abbess was shocked." Darius pointed out and Niamh giggled. Duncan tried to picture the two of them with some abbess before he was even born. It made him smile.

"To old friends." Duncan filled their glasses with the amber honey wine.

"Aye, and new ones too." She raised her glass and the three of them drained their mugs.

"Now then, why did you scoot our Mister Ryan out of here so forcefully?" Niamh turned to Duncan. "And why do you look so sheepish?" She owlishly regarded Darius.

"There were a few things about Felice Martin's little *visit* to Seattle that we...um..." Duncan glanced away. "left out."

"Such as?"

"Richie and Felicia..." Darius looked uncomfortable.

"I spared her because Richie begged me to." Duncan said, with a *don't look at me* look.

"So he doesn't know she's dead?"

"No."

"Well, you didn't take her head, *I did*." Niamh was puzzled.

"That's not the point." Duncan ran his hand through his hair.

"It seems while Richie knows she could not be trusted, he wants to believe she might have changed." Darius explained.

"Well, she didn't. As soon as she was safely far away from you and Richie, she went right back to her old tricks."

"Look, I know she killed someone very close to you, and I'm not excusing that. If it hadn't been for Richie, I would have tracked her down myself simply because she threatened those whom I love." Duncan spread his hands in a helpless gesture.

"I don't want to argue with you, MacLeod. It's over and finished and done. You have to tell him. The boy needs to know the truth." Niamh frowned.

"Yeah, well, I know that."

"So why haven't you done it?"

"I'm just waiting for the right time."

"I'll tell him for you, if you like. After all, I'm the one who did it. Her quickening is a part of me now, the task should fall to me." She sighed.

"He's a good boy, but you know what they say about love." Duncan shrugged.

"Blind as a bat, I've got the track record to prove it," she smiled wryly. "You, you're the lucky one. Thirteen years, I hear."

"Tessa is a charming woman," Darius raised his mug. "Duncan has amazing luck."

"Luck had nothing to do with it." He protested, preening, and they laughed.

"Oh, and so modest too." Niamh laughed, feeling better than she had in weeks. This trip had been a wonderful idea.

* * *

This trip had been a dreadful idea. Vassily hated Paris. He hated the rain. But there was a job to be done, and he prided himself on being the best in his field.

He made certain he had enough clips and tucked the gun into its holster beneath the trenchcoat, whistling as he stepped out into the street.

Another day, another hundred thousand dollars, that's what he always said. That was worth getting a little damp.

* * *

"So, what is she like?" Tessa asked as Richie threw his jacket over the couch.

"Who?"

"Darius's friend, Niamh."

"She's okay."

"That's not very descriptive."

"I don't get it, all of a sudden Mac hustled me out of there, he even gave me the keys to the Citroen to drive home. He *never* lets me drive that car."

"So you think something is up?" Tessa tried to sound curious, but she knew full well that Duncan hadn't told Richie about Felice. They'd had a fight about it shortly after Niamh had telephoned from Toronto to let them know she was coming.

"Maybe. I don't know. Maybe the idea of more than the two of them in the same city just makes me jumpy."

"So what is she like?"

"Tiny. I mean, we are talking like very short here. And she's funny. I was expecting her to be like one of the others, I guess."

"Grace, or Amanda."

"Yeah, them. But she isn't. I guess there isn't really a 'type', if that makes any sense."

"I think it makes perfect sense." Tessa shrugged. "People are all unique, why should immortals be any different?"

"Yeah, but looking at her, it's hard to figure out how she lived so long. I mean, Amanda I can understand. And Grace...."

"Grace never lacked for company," Tessa supplied, and he nodded.

"Yeah, but it makes you think. We're talking nine hundred years ago. It's not like women's lib had hit yet, but she learned and survived."

"That's what they all do. The ones who learn the most survive the longest."

"And it's really weird thinking of her as older than Mac. She said she was *fifteen* when it happened. I mean, she doesn't look fifteen. I guess she does, but she doesn't act fifteen. Do they all do that? Kinda keep aging as the years go by?"

"Why are you asking me? I can only tell you what Duncan tells me."

"And he's never quite been into full disclosure."

"He likes to have some secrets left."

"Or maybe he just doesn't realise he's leaving anything out. I mean, you'll be talking and he'll say stuff like 'Well, I remember when Sam Beckett said to me' or 'I told Queen Victoria such and such, but did she listen to me, no...' and you're thinking, why doesn't he tell us these things? Doesn't he realise how cool it is to have met all those people? And he just shrugs it off."

"Well, you get used to that."

"Yeah?"

"Yes, in a decade or two." She wrinkled her nose and they laughed.

* * *

"So who was Sister Coralie?" Duncan asked as he walked Niamh back to her hotel, turning his collar up against the chill of the evening.

"I spent a few years in an abbey, a long time ago. It was Darius's idea. There was one of our kind who made a point of hunting women. I could have taken him, but Darius... he wouldn't hear of it. He wanted me to drop out of the Game, perhaps become a scholar, something. Just live, without the violence."

"Yeah, that sounds like Darius." Duncan chuckled. "Did you?"

"What, drop out? For a while." Niamh paused on the steps of the hotel, searching the lighted city for familiar shadows and buildings. "A short while."

"And this immortal...?"

"I faced him."

"Did you...?"

"No. He got away." Her eyes darted from the traffic speeding by to and her feet. There was an uncomfortable silence.

"So you'll talk to Richie, then?"

"First thing tomorrow, if you like."

"I'll see you then."

"Yes, and then I can finally meet this amazing woman of yours."

"We're looking forward to seeing you." Duncan sighed, and held the door open for her, then watched her disappear into the lobby.

* * *

In her hotel room, Niamh restlessly flipped channels on the television. Finally she clicked it off with a sound of disgust. It was time she faced the fact that being here, again, and talking with MacLeod of that old time had brought back some memories that she had hoped could stay buried.

* * *

"Hello, poppet." Darius looked up to see Niamh in the doorway, as he knew she would be. Who else would come calling at eight in the morning?

"You know I hate it when you call me that."

"Well, I'm older than you. Allow me some idiosyncrasies."

"Darius, you're older than *everyone*. I can't see you calling MacLeod 'poppet'. Or perhaps you call Fitz 'sweeting'?"

"You were always a terror."

"Oh, I've got a mouth on me, you've always known I'm not one to stay silent."

"So what is on your mind?"

"Thanks to MacLeod, nosing about dear Sister Coralie, I'm afraid Victor is on my mind."

"Ah."

"Have you heard anything of him all these years? Has someone else done my work for me, or should I be looking over my shoulder?"

"No, from all I have heard, he is still alive." Darius frowned. "Why are you concerned with him now, after so long?"

"You know what I did to him. He won't give up. He hates me, perhaps more than any of our kind I have ever faced."

"And you're afraid."

"Yes. I've been hunted before, you know that. But Victor—"

"Victor came closer to killing you than anyone else."

"It's more than that. He was mad." She swallowed painfully.

"I remember."

* * *

Paris
1223

Niamh wrapped her cloak around her as she made her way through the torch-lit streets of the city, allowing her mind to wander just a little bit. She entered the gates of the churchyard without even noticing.

Himiko had left the city with an old friend, an Egyptian with a sharp sense of humour and an eye for the ladies. The ancient Japanese immortal had said very little about where she was going save that Ramirez had been to her what she now was to Niamh, and that they had a great deal to catch up on.

Niamh was somewhat jealous. And more than a bit nervous. She had only killed once in the more than one hundred years since her birth, and she had the uneasy sensation of being stalked, though she knew not by whom. She wished for her friend there beside her, to tell her if she was being foolish or righteously cautious.

Which was why she had left her home this night to visit Darius. He was the only immortal she had met besides Himiko whom she trusted with her life. He would know what to say to allay her fears. He always did.

She felt *him* even before she heard the jingle of a horses's harness in the darkened church yard. It wasn't Darius. It couldn't be Darius, not yet... She drew her sword as he appeared in the patch of moonlight.

From the portry, Darius felt the rush of two souls and frowned as he pulled open the heavy wooden door in time to see Niamh being circled by another immortal who turned to grin at the priest, a feral smile like a wolf's in the night.

"I am Niamh Ní Bhriain, of the Brianaigh." Niamh took a defensive stance, eyes wide.

"You can call me Victor, my dear." He was dressed all in black, trews and a padded shirt mean to be worn beneath mail, yet he wore none. His sword was still sheathed at his hip, and he made no move to draw, but Niamh was terrified all the same. He watched her with hungry eyes, sending a chill down her back, and he did not dismount, looking down at her from above.

"This is holy ground." Darius's voice rang out from the doorway, and Niamh had never heard him in anger before. *"This has no place here."*

"Oh, I mean no harm. Just introducing myself to the lady."

"You've been following me, watching me," Niamh accused and was met with laughter. "You admit it?"

"I'm flattered you noticed me." He positioned his horse between herself and Darius.

"What is your game?" Niamh fought the desire the flee, though all her instincts urged her to.

"Must a man play games with a beautiful woman he wants to get to know better?" His tone drew gooseflesh across her arms, made all the hairs stand up at the base of her neck.

"Leave this place." Darius pointedly walked around the horse, standing at Niamh's shoulder.

"As you wish," Victor reined in his horse, heading back towards the gate. "But I'll be back."

* * *

Niamh appeared at the barge at nine for coffee and croissant, looking a little tired, but bright eyed and smiling.

From Duncan and Richie's description, Tessa had been expecting some sort of mix of Amanda and Grace, they only two female Immortals Tessa knew well. And, also according to their descriptions, she got someone completely different.

"Darius has told me a lot about you." Niamh shook her hand warmly.

"All good, I hope. He speaks the world of you."

"He's always surprised I've kept my head, he still thinks of me as a child."

Niamh, though still recovering from the death of her mentor and friend, Himiko, was charming and lively, as well as quite a storyteller. And she had quite a tale to tell, of vampires in Toronto.

"It's all true, I swear it." Niamh sipped her coffee, meeting their amazed stares. "Well, I was just as surprised as you, but as they say, there are more things in heav'n and earth..."

"Vampires?" Duncan laughed.

"Immortals?" Niamh matched his tone, and Tessa smiled.

"Why not? I, for one, am ready to believe anything after a decade with you." She tickled Duncan's ribs and he squirmed.

"Tess!"

"I find it fascinating and a bit frightening. But you'd like Nick. At least, I think you would. He does dwell in the past a bit, but then, we all do I suppose. He's doing his best coping, just as we are."

"Well, I'll believe it when I see it." Richie shook his head. "I mean, c'mon. Dracula?"

"No, not Dracula. Nick's French. He was born about 1205, I'd say. I'll have to ask him. And he's not a count, he was a knight."

"And now he's a police detective?" Richie was unclear on the concept.

"Yes. It makes him feel better. Like he's giving something back instead of taking." Niamh shrugged. "He hasn't killed for blood in over a century, I believe. But he has something of a guilt complex. Very medieval."

Tessa giggled, punching Duncan in the shoulder. "Sound familiar?"

"I'm very cosmopolitan."

"Yeah, Nick thinks he is too." Niamh rolled her eyes, and Tessa didn't bother to hide her smile. "Anyway, he was very helpful with Himiko's case."

"Yeah, but how do you prosecute an immortal?" Richie laughed. "I mean, life sentence takes on a whole new meaning..."

"Yeah well, that wasn't an option."

* * *

Vassily stubbed out his cigarette and tapped out a number on a slim cellular phone he took from his pocket.

"Vassily?" the voice on the other end asked, needlessly since the assassin was the only one with that private number.

"She is on a barge. I followed her from her hotel this morning. She was met by the man and the boy."

"You must not take her when she is with MacLeod."

"And the boy?"

"Kill him if you must. He is of no consequence."

"You want her alive?"

"Alive or dead, it makes little difference to me. But you must handcuff the body regardless."

"I don't understand...."

"I am not paying you to understand. I am paying you to do a job. And I am paying you well."

That you are, you deranged maniac, Vassily did not dare say, instead refolded the phone and ordered another coffee. What did it matter to him if his employer was afraid of a dead body? The man was crazy.

* * *

"Richie, can I talk to you?" Niamh helped him carry the coffee cups out to the kitchen.

"Yeah, sure. About what?"

"Why don't we take a walk?"

"Okay." He shrugged and told Duncan and Tessa they'd be back.

"Don't be too long." Tessa called after them as they slipped out the door.

* * *

"So what do you want to talk about?" Richie stuck his hands deep in his pockets as they walked along the Seine towards the church.

"It was hard for me, losing Himiko. I mean, it's the Gathering. I know what that means, but I thought she would live forever."

"She was one of the good guys, huh?"

"Yeah. She was." Niamh smiled.

"So... did you get who killed her?"

"Yes, I did. And that's what I wanted to talk to you about." She sat down on a low wall, brushing her bangs out of her eyes. "Richie, it was Felice Martin."

Richie was silent for a long moment, a frown creasing his forehead. He drew circles on the ground with the toe of his sneaker, blinking. "Felicia?"

"She learned all she could from Himiko and then killed her. She pretended to be her friend, and then she went after me. I had no choice, she threatened my friends, challenged me—"

"I know." He snapped. "I know what she was."

"I'm sorry. But there was nothing I could have done."

"She tried to kill me, y'know. And Tessa, all to get to Duncan. I knew she didn't love me. But it still hurt." He chewed on his bottom lip. "So that was the big secret, huh? What you and Mac were so antsy about yesterday."

"Yeah, well, he cares about you. I can see why, you're a good kid."

"Gee, thanks. I love being the youngest person in the room. Eternally."

"It could be worse." Niamh laughed. "You know, people judge you by the company you keep. You're in the pink."

"And you hang with vampires and cops."

"And coroners, and antique dealers. Did I mention thieves, brigands and small children?"

"Kids?"

"Well, they're all grandparents now. Maybe that's great grandparents." Niamh frowned, trying to figure out how many generations she had misplaced.

"You've lived a long time." Richie observed.

"Relatively, yeah." She nodded.

"What do you like most about this century?" Richie was finally going to get some of those niggling little questions Mac couldn't be bothered with answered. It was kinda cool.

"The pictures." She replied, without hesitation. "I adored them, I still do. I used to go to every moving picture that came out, they fascinated me."

"Which one do you like best?"

"Oh my, a hundred years of films.... Anything with Danny Kaye."

"You're kidding."

"He was marvellous! I was terribly upset when he died. Have you ever seen *Knock on Wood*?"

"Um... no."

"What about *Inspector General*, have you seen that one? It's based on a book."

"Nope."

"*White Christmas*?"

"I think, when I was little."

"*The Court Jester*?"

"The pellet with the poison is in the vessel with the pestle!"

"The chalice with the palace holds the brew that is true." She laughed, delighted. "I used to say that until all the words got mixed up. It drove people *crazy*."

* * *

FOREVER

Vassily carefully screwed the silencer onto the rifle, laying flat against the roof. He lined up the girl in his crosshairs, deciding dead or alive always worked easier dead.

He squeezed the trigger, swearing quietly as Niamh laughed, moving a few inches to her left, the bullet hitting the ground behind her head.

* * *

"Did you hear something?" Richie cocked his head, and Niamh blinked.

"Like what?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "I don't know, it sounded like—"

Niamh shoved Richie behind the wall as three more bullets hit the sod and the wall, sending up a cloud of dust and fragments with each tiny puff of the silencer.

"Is there any particular reason why anyone might be shooting at you?" Niamh leaned up against the wall, flinching as three more shots hit the top of the wall and the sod at her feet.

"Oh, I don't know. The usual, I suppose." Richie covered his head with his arms. "What the hell kind of a question is that? Ever since I met you guys, people have been shooting at me."

"It must be very disconcerting. Duck."

"You know, they could be shooting at you." Richie gritted his teeth, refusing to admit he was absolutely terrified.

"That bastard." Niamh moved to look and try to see, and Richie dragged her back down.

"Are you nuts?"

"Well, what can he do? Kill me?"

"You wanna *find out*?"

* * *

Vassily cursed in several languages, reloading. He had to force her out into the open before he attracted undue attention. If he hadn't already, Vassily craned his neck as sirens blared through a square two blocks away.

* * *

"Come on," Niamh grabbed Richie as three seconds went by without another shot being fired. They crawled along the inside of the wall, jumping to the ground below as another shot cracked the pavement at their feet.

"Shit." Niamh took off, trying to shield Richie in front of her. She ignored the stinging sensation as a bullet grazed her shoulder, and they headed in a zig-zag fashion for the safety of a crowded street.

* * *

"*Shit*." Vassily swore as the two of them disappeared into traffic, and the sirens grew closer. He shoved the gun into his valise and leaped across to the next roof, landing with a clatter.

By the time the sirens disappeared, so had he.

* * *

"Someone shot at me today."

"*What?*" Darius stood up so quickly papers drifted from his desk to the floor, unnoticed. "Where? When?"

"I was talking to Richie a few blocks from the barge. It was a sniper, about an hour ago, I didn't know where else to go but here."

"And the boy?"
"He's fine, he's outside. I'm certain that this is about me, not him."
"Does MacLeod know?"
"No." She shook her head. "This is supposed to be my vacation, you know."
"Don't get grumpy." Darius cracked a smile.
"Oh, if it's him, I'll get more than just grumpy, I'll tell you that now."
"You're sure it has something to do with Victor?"
"This whole thing has his stink about it. The treachery, the fear."
"I had hoped that crippled as he was, one of us might have—"
"You never thought any such thing, you hate any talk of killing."
"Were he a mortal man, I would have condemned him to the law then, with no qualms."
"But we are not for mortal courts, and we have none of our own save the sword."

* * *

Morienval
1223

"Abbess Claire, allow me to introduce you to my niece, Madeleine. She would like to become a novice of your order." Darius pushed Niamh forward and she plastered a false smile on her face, bowing her head before the seemingly two hundred year old nun.
"It's my dream, my lady Abbess."
"We will be happy to accommodate you, my dear girl." She patted her hand, squinting in her general direction.
"I'm sure your coffers will be happy to accommodate my dowry as well." She smiled sweetly and Darius squeezed her elbow painfully.
"Pardon?"
"She's very happy to be here."
"Ah." She nodded her head, smiling blankly.
"She's deaf," Niamh sang sweetly as they made their way from the office to the courtyard. "And she thinks I'm your daughter."
"Let her."
"I don't want to be here."
"Do you want to lose your head?"
"No." Niamh chewed on her bottom lip, thoughtful. "But to hide on Holy Ground—"
"You are young, Niamh. And I would not see you die so quickly. He would come for you, you know that."
"I would play the Game, Darius. But I will not play as a pawn."
"It is a different game that he plays. I have asked after him, in Paris. He took the head of Charlotte of Brittany last month."
"The grand dame herself?" Niamh had met Charlotte through Himiko when they first came to France. She was six hundred if she was a day, and it was Himiko who referred to her as the Grand Dame. She had been everything from a courtesan to a pirate, and was one of the strongest women Niamh had ever known.
"It was worse than that, he hunted her down and raped her before he killed her. He boasted of it in Paris, and I fear he plans to make you his next."
"Darius..." She looked at him with eyes full of fear.
"I want you to stay here." He touched her shoulder. "Promise me."
"Himiko will return within the month. You must get word to her and Ramirez when you return to Paris, tell her where I am and warn her."
"I will, poppet."

"I can't stay here forever."

"I know, child. But going to ground now it the best thing, until one of our kind stops this animal."

* * *

"He's doing it again. I can't feel him near, but the sensation of being watched, the terror. It is so familiar." Niamh shuddered, and Darius put a hand on her shoulder.

"He still frightens you."

"Damn straight." She shook her head, embarrassed as her words echoed in the stone chamber. "Sorry."

"Niamh?" Richie appeared in the doorway, still looking shaken up. "I don't think that guy followed us, shouldn't we call Mac and Tessa and tell them we're okay?"

"Of course, you're right. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Yeah, well, it's been a long day." Richie dialled.

"It's 10 am." Niamh grumbled. "I hope things don't continue this way."

* * *

Darius stared at the chessboard still set up. He and MacLeod were in the middle of a game, as usual. He picked up one of the pawns set to one side, captured.

That was what Niamh had been like; a pawn put out of play at his request, but the game had still caught up to her.

* * *

Morienval
1223

"Sister Coralie here would turn me to a brewster, *Uncle*." Niamh kissed Darius's cheek respectfully, holding in a giggle. His visits to the convent were rare, and she cherished them.

"Would she? And what progress has she made?" Darius smiled. In the white robes of a novice, with only her flushed and smiling face peeking out from her wimple, she seemed like a child.

"I believe my mead a wee bit on the strong side."

"Here, let me taste it." He took the mug from her hand and savoured the strong flavour of the young mead. It reminded him of his youth. "I do not think it is so terrible. Here, Sister, let me have your opinion."

Sister Coralie, a meek woman in her early thirties with the bright eyes of a bird, put up her hands in protest. "Father, I could not."

"Do you not tend the bees? Come, see the fruits of their labours, I am sure God would not mind."

Within an hour, Coralie was using language Niamh hadn't heard since the ship across the channel, and she was feeling pretty punchy herself.

"Oh, I think the abbess is going to be very angry with me." She giggled, hands over her mouth.

"What have I loosed on this unsuspecting abbey?" Darius laughed as she leaned against his shoulder, still laughing.

"Aye, it's all your fault." They settled on a bench in the garden, while Coralie tried to tend the bees, her white shrouded form weaving a bit in the strong afternoon sunlight. "Uncle." she added, belatedly, and broke into renewed giggles. She sighed, calming herself, though her eyes still danced.

"Have you heard from Himiko?"

"Yes, she comes. I got word of her from Constantinople, she should be back soon."

"And Victor?"

"I put out word. He was last seen in the south, near Nimes. He took the head of a young woman from the West of Africa. She had not yet taken her first Quickening, yet he took hers, regardless."

"But he has not yet left France?"

"No." Darius watched her closely, as she toyed with the edge of her wimple as a child might the end of her plait.

"What if I met Himiko in the East?" She did not meet his eyes as she lightly stated the question, already knowing what his answer would be.

"He has not found you yet, I have hidden you well, but I don't know how much longer you will stay well hid. If you leave now, he could catch you."

"I am getting tired of hiding." Niamh scowled, looking for all the world like a petulant child, even though the matter was as far from a child's game as a sword was from a sewing needle.

"Do you not like it here?"

"Why? Would you turn me into a nun?"

"Just think of it, you could stay here as long as you wished, you'd be safe from the game, you could turn your mind to higher learning—"

"I can't read." Niamh laughed.

"You could learn. I could teach you."

"You would have me put up my sword forever?"

"Think on it."

* * *

He placed the pawn back on the board, still lost in memories. He had tried so hard, with so many. First Greyson, then Niamh, Xavier, and MacLeod. Slowly he would lose them all to the Game. It was the nature of their kind, and it was like raging against the wind and sky to try and change it.

Yet he always tried.

* * *

"*What?*"

"Duncan, no one got hurt, it's no big deal." Richie put up his hands, as if to ward the angry Scot off. Niamh leaned against the back of the couch, hand over her mouth, looking distracted.

"No big deal, huh? A guy shooting at you in broad daylight, and it's no big deal."

"Oh, and like it hasn't happened to you."

"*Richie.*"

Niamh put a hand on his arm. "It's about me, not Richie. I don't know who it is, but when I find out, I'll take care of it."

"You don't know that." He scowled.

"Yes, I do." Niamh tried to reassure him. "I think it's one of us."

"We don't use guns, it's not our way."

"It was for Zachary," Tessa reminded him. "He thought nothing of using a gun to slow you down, so he could kill you."

"Tess—"

"Duncan," Niamh broke in, "I don't think I'll be coming by tomorrow. Or the next day, not until I can end this once and for all."

"You know who it is, don't you." It was a statement, not a question. yet it deserved an answer all the same.

"I have enough of an idea. One of us who needs a gun."

* * *

FOREVER

Morienval
1224

Niamh silently swore in four languages as she lay awake in the novices quarters. Her pallet was lumpy, she went from hot to cold, and there was no way she was going to be getting any sleep that night. Another fortnight in the abbey and she was going to go mad.

She made her way to the kitchens, wrapped in her heavy woollen cloak against the chill. Vigilae has ended and none of the other nuns would be out and about again till Matins, so she had till dawn to practice.

No one had ever caught her at her night activities except the cook, and while she thought it bizarre, but had no desire to spread tales. Niamh usually sparred in the root cellar, but that had been locked for the past few weeks, after some petty thieves had broken in. So she decided to work out her tensions in the pantry.

She drew the short sword that she had taken from her first Quickening and began to dance.

It wasn't dancing exactly, but while she went through the movements that had become as familiar to her as breathing, she heard a walking song in her head, beating out the time. As the blade made patterns in the light from the wall sconces, she sang softly under her breath. She lost the sense of where she was, even when she was, and just thought of the steps, the rhythm of her breathing. She became empty and it brought her joy.

That was when she felt him.

She heard the scrape of bootheel on stone and Victor separated from the shadows, clapping. The sound echoed off the stone walls, but Niamh could barely hear it over the laboured sound of her own breathing.

"Why are you here?"

"Ah, my pretty, who wouldn't want to be where you are?"

"If you want my head why don't you just take it? Why the games?"

"But I like the games." He reached out to caress her cheek and she jumped back as if his touch burned.

"This is holy ground!"

"I don't intend to kill you," His smile was feral in the darkness. "Yet."

* * *

"What happened?" Duncan paced the width of the barge, touching Tessa's shoulder as he passed her and she squeezed his fingers.

"I was on holy ground. I couldn't fight him."

"What did you do?" Richie looked at her with new eyes.

"Severed his sword arm at the shoulder and threw it on the fire." Niamh's eyes were clear, unblinking, but she was not seeing them. She was remembering the fear and the blood of a time long passed.

"He could be ambidextrous," Duncan reminded her, and she crossed her arms over her breast to stop her shivering.

"He could be. But I doubt it. He's survived this long solely using his wits. And he hates me. I can almost feel it, a palatable thing following me. Holy ground stops us, but it wouldn't stop a mortal with a gun. If it comes down to it, it wouldn't stop a mortal with a sword, either. I didn't come here to involve you in this, MacLeod. And I think it's time I left."

"Niamh—" Tessa began, but stopped, unsure of what she meant to say.

"As long as I am here, I'm placing all of you in danger, and I can't do that."

"There is something you can do." Duncan looked her straight in the eye.

"What?"

"Become the hunter."

* * *

"I lost her," Vassily didn't bother with pleasantries, he didn't have the time.

"Where?"

"By the barge. They ran into a crowd, and the police—"

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know."

"Well you'd best find her, hadn't you? The boy will warn MacLeod and I will have two of them to deal with."

"If you want me to take him, the price goes up."

"For now, concentrate on the girl. When she has been taken care of, perhaps then I will turn to the matter of MacLeod. If she is not at the barge, or her hotel, you will be sure to find her at a church on the Seine, you know the one, we spoke of it before. She will be in the company of a priest, a Father Darius. She will be an easy target."

"But in broad daylight—"

"I do not care. I care only that you bring her to me." There was an audible click and then silence and Vassily had to deal with the fact that he had been dismissed.

His employer treated him no better than a servant, a fool and an underling, and it was beginning to grate on his nerves. Refolding the cellular, he slipped it back into his pocket and motioned the girl over to top up his coffee while he planned his next move.

* * *

"Come here," Tessa grabbed Niamh's hand, pulling her towards the kitchen.

"Where are we going?" Niamh blinked, looking back at MacLeod, who only shrugged.

"To have a little woman to woman talk." Tessa called over her shoulder. She refilled their coffee cups and pulled up two stools.

"I can see why MacLeod loves you, you're a take charge kinda gal." Niamh couldn't help but smile.

"This man, Victor, you really fear him."

"Oh yes."

"Can I ask you something?" Tessa's eyes shone, and Niamh couldn't decide if it was with pity or empathy. She shook her head, looking away.

"You don't have to. It was almost eight hundred years ago. I can't exactly go into therapy now, can I?"

"Maybe you should. Eight hundred years, it could have been yesterday as far as you are concerned."

"You're smart too."

"For a mortal."

"For anyone. Look at me, I'm twice MacLeod's age and I obviously don't know a thing. Mind you, I started off in a mud and bark hut back when people thought if you bathed too often, your skin would fall off. Okay, I've made some strides. But sometimes... sometimes I'm still a fifteen year old girl who is afraid of her own shadow and can't understand why all this has happened to her."

"Well, give it another hundred years." Tessa held up her mug for a toast, and Niamh mirrored her.

"Here's to seeing if I age gracefully."

They sipped their coffee in silence, then Niamh cast a glance at the kitchen door.

"What do you think the guys are doing?"

"I know them, they are in the living room, pacing, wondering what we're talking about."

"Well, it would really burst their bubble if they knew most women talk about sex when they're alone."

"Speaking of sex..." Tessa's eyes lit up, a devilish sparkle to her smile and Niamh giggled

* * *

FOREVER

"What do you think they're talking about in there?" Richie gave up trying to eavesdrop. Except for the occasional laugh, he couldn't make out any particulars.

"Are you kidding? They're probably talking about sex."

"No way! Women don't do that."

"Wanna bet?"

Richie continued to look sceptical and Duncan shook his head, chuckling. The door opened and they both looked up expectantly as Niamh came through, Tessa behind her.

"You going to be okay?" Duncan asked Niamh as she pulled her trenchcoat on, brushing her hair out of her eyes.

"I think so. I don't know where to start."

"I think you do." Duncan searched her face, a hand on hers.

"I know, I have to tell him."

"He just wants you safe."

"He still won't be happy." She slipped out the door and Duncan stuck his hands deep in his pockets.

"Somebody want to tell me what all that was about?" Richie looked bewildered.

"Darius."

"I know she's his friend—"

"I think it's a little more than that."

"But he's a priest!" Richie was shocked.

"Yeah, well, he's still a man." Duncan shrugged. "And she's known him for a very, very long time."

* * *

"MacLeod has given me a very interesting suggestion." Niamh didn't face Darius, she knew exactly what look he would have on his face. That *I can't believe you're even contemplating that* look.

"Which is?"

"Stop running from Victor, and hunt the hunter."

"He told you *what*?" Darius stood up, almost knocking over his tea mug in his haste.

"Stop giving me that look, I knew you'd have that look. You heard me. You and I both know that if I face him on equal terms now, I would win."

"He will not let you near him on equal terms. Surely you realise that."

"What would you have me do? Hide? Become Sister Madeleine once more, *Oncle*?" she snapped. "I can't do that any more, Darius! Maybe once, but not now. It's the Gathering."

"You don't have to play the Game..."

"I have no choice! And someday you will see that you don't either. Holy walls may protect you, for now, but none of us really knows what the Gathering is. You could be driven mad if you don't fight. I could be, any of us! Someday I may be forced to fight you or Duncan, or Fitz and I can't do that..." Niamh found she was shouting, and she didn't care. "I can't. I don't want to ever have to hurt you." She beat her fists against his chest as he tried to quiet her.

"Poppet..."

"Dammit, don't call me that. I don't fear him nearly as much as I fear losing you."

"How can you lose me?"

"You are my oldest friend. Himiko is gone. This game will take us all, it has to." She looked him straight in the eye. "I'm going to die. Someone is going to take my head, and I'm getting tired of it, all of it."

"Don't say such things."

"You have been alive longer than anyone I know. Aren't you tired?" He could hear the tears in her voice, tears that she tried to hold in check.

"I have seen wonders in these thousands of years that were undreamed of when I was a boy. Every step humanity takes fascinates me and I don't think that shall ever change."

"You look at things with the wonder of a child and I envy that, because I know that you are wiser than I will ever be." She shook her head, smiling.

"I am immortal, but I am still a human being. I'm not perfect, Niamh."

"Yes you are. You are perfect." She stroked his cheek and then froze, as if the gesture startled her even though it was she who made it. "Just my luck, to finally figure it out, and you're a Catholic priest."

"Niamh—" he took her hand in his.

"Just what the world needs, an immortal Thorn Birds saga." She tore her hand from his and grabbed her purse. "I'm leaving. I have to go."

Darius stared at the door as it closed behind her, suddenly at a loss.

* * *

Furiously wiping tears from her eyes, Niamh stopped at the curb, waiting to cross.

This was ridiculous. They fought over nothing, less than nothing. She should not be so affected.

"Oh, who am I kidding?" she muttered beneath her breath, just before a hand clamped over her mouth and she felt the cold pressure of a gun's muzzle at her temple.

"Don't move, or I'll blow your head off."

As that was a distinct possibility, Niamh froze, her heart pounding in her ears.

* * *

Richie pressed himself up against the stone wall, willing himself to be invisible as the gunman dragged Niamh back towards a dark blue van parked in the alley. As the tired squealed and it peeled out into traffic, Richie counted breaths and leapt on his motorcycle and followed.

He must have been crazy. But then again, it wasn't like he hadn't done this sort of thing before.

* * *

Niamh fidgeted, hearing the handcuffs rattle and clink behind her. Her arms ached already, and she didn't have the foggiest idea who this mortal was, except that he must have been the gunman who took pot shots are her and Richie.

"How much is he paying you?"

"Shut up."

"I'll double it."

"I said *shut up.*"

Niamh recognised a trace of an accent buried beneath the non-accent he must have studied hard to cultivate. Eastern European. Definitely.

"He's quite mad, you know."

"I know."

As they rounded a corner, Niamh was thrown against the side of the van, and she managed to get one leg beneath her. He glanced at her nervously using the rearview mirror. She balanced precariously, waiting. She heard the unmistakeable sound of a him cocking the gun.

She felt them lean into another turn, and as she was hidden from his view, pulled her handcuffed hands underneath her so her wrists rested against the back of her calves. When the turn pushed her against the side of the van, she bit back a cry of pain as she slipped her feet through the circle made by her chained hands.

Niamh jumped up and threw her arms over Vassily's head, trying to choke him with the handcuffs. The van weaved from side to side as he fought for control, steering with one hand and pointing the gun with the other as she tried to crush his windpipe.

He squeezed off a shot, and Niamh screamed as the bullet hit her in the chest.

Vassily, coughing still, bent down and felt for a pulse. When he was satisfied she was dead, he restarted the van.

He was going to have to charge dry cleaning costs too now, blood was a bitch to get out of silk.

* * *

Richie watched the van swerve, and heard the gunshot. He held his breath as it sat for a moment at a curb, then started up again. He followed close behind, worried. She may have been immortal, but a bullet would still do a fair bit of damage.

* * *

"Tess, where's Richie?" Duncan looked up from the book he was reading, and she settled down beside him on the couch.

"I don't know, he left after Niamh did. I think he has a crush on her."

"Probably." Duncan shrugged.

"You don't sound very concerned."

"He'll get over it."

"Like I did?" She brushed a stray lock of dark hair off his forehead, and he caught her hand, pressing a kiss into her palm.

"I don't think it's that kind of crush. He's more curious than infatuated."

"I think you are right." The phone rang, and Duncan grabbed it.

"Mac?" Richie's voice was barely above a whisper.

"Richie? Where are you?"

"I'm at a warehouse, I followed Niamh—"

"Richie, I *told* you—"

"Mac, I think she's in trouble."

* * *

Niamh had the dizzying feeling of being carried over someone's shoulder like a sack of potatoes. The front of her blouse was soaked and caked with blood, and she still hurt just about all over.

She was so tired of getting shot. Twice in one decade was more than enough.

Vassily dropped her to the cold cement floor, and she listened carefully as he lit up a cigarette, then his footsteps faded into the distance, and the metal clang of the door being lowered and locked.

She sat up slowly, her hands still cuffed in front of her.

"This just isn't my day."

She stood up, ears ringing, and froze as she heard the door.

* * *

"She's dead." Victor kept glancing back at the warehouse, nervously. This job hadn't gone at all well, and he just wanted to get the hell out of the country.

"You have taken the body to the appointed place?" The voice on the other end of the phone still retained that monotone, as if he was discussing the weather, or the results of a football match instead of murder. Vassily shivered, and not from the chill.

"Yes. Now, where's my money?"

"I will bring it. But you must stay with the body."

"Hey, you paid me to get her, you didn't say anything about babysitting a corpse." Hanging around dead bodies gave him the creeps, despite his chosen profession. Usually by the time they were cold, he was as far away as humanly possible.

"If you do not, them I'm afraid you will be a corpse before long, and you wouldn't like that, now would you?"

"Are you threatening me?"

"Most likely she would get to you long before I would, my dear Victor."

"She is *dead*. She's not going to be getting to anyone."

"But of course." The line went dead, and Vassily hurled cursewords at the dialtone, furious at the turn this job was taking.

* * *

The door opened slowly, and Niamh clutched the first weapon she could find, a crowbar, in her cuffed hands, leaning against the wall in the shadow, her heart pounding. As a figure slipped inside, she almost swung before a thatch of blond hair caught the light.

"Richie, you idiot! I almost brained you!" Niamh whispered fiercely, punching him in the shoulder.

"So much for Richie Ryan to the rescue." He observed wryly, and fished two paper clips out of his pocket and took the bewildered Niamh's hands in his as he started on the cuffs.

"Where they hell did you learn to pick handcuffs?" Niamh asked as the cuffs slipped off and she massaged her bruised wrists.

"The same place I learned to avoid guys with names like Meat and Chainsaw. Come on, MacLeod is on his way."

"*What?*"

"Well, wouldn't it be nice to have a sword so you can take this guy?"

They froze at the sound of a key in the lock.

* * *

Vassily, still swearing at his employer, switched on his torch so he could see as he lifted the door. He focused it on the spot where he had dumped the body, and saw it lying there, same as before.

"Insane," he muttered, fishing another cigarette out of his pack and setting the torch down so he could light it.

Pain bloomed in the back of his head, and he hit the ground heavily.

"Don't you know smoking can be hazardous to your health?" Richie dropped the crowbar with a ring of metal on concrete, and Niamh tossed him the cuffs, which he locked around the hitman's wrists.

"Let's get out of here." Niamh flashed him a smile.

"What, leaving the party so soon?" A voice rang out from the door, where a man stood silhouetted by the setting sun, a menacing black shape.

"You know, Victor, I was going to hunt you down just as you had me. Now you've gone and spoilt the surprise." Niamh *tsk*ed, picking up the crowbar Richie had dropped.

The sound of the gun being cocked took some of the steam out of her.

"Dammit, can't you play fair just this once?" she snapped, glancing nervously at Richie.

"Ah, but the game is so much more interesting with a few twists thrown in, don't you think?"

"Let the boy go, he is none of your concern."

"And lose my advantage? Even if you didn't care whether I took your head or not, a bullet hole in MacLeod's protegé is certainly a deterrent to your bashing my head in with that crowbar."

"You would think, in eight hundred years you would have learned how to fence with your left hand. For heaven's sake, Inigo Montoya did." Niamh covered her fear with exasperation, and mocking him made her feel better even if it didn't do a damn thing to improve their situation.

"If that is what passes for wit amongst your friends, I'm sure I'm doing them a favour." Victor stepped over the body of his unconscious henchman, and glanced back at it, sighing. "Vassily really didn't understand our game."

He aimed rather haphazardly and shot the hitman in the head. The sound of the gun echoed in the warehouse, louder than Niamh remembered it, and she held back a cry. After all, the man had shot her. Richie, however, had turned a particular shade of white not unlike curdled milk.

"So much for honour among thieves." Niamh stepped in front of Richie, as if she could block him from a bullet as easily as she could block him from Victor's sight.

"Silly girl, I have never stooped to thievery."

"What you took from me certainly wasn't given freely." Niamh took a step towards him, fury shining in her eyes. Gun or no gun, she wanted this man's head.

"Wasn't my arm payment enough, you little bitch?" Victor spat, moving the gun from Richie to Niamh.

"What do you plan to do? Shoot me and then take my head?"

"That is the general idea, yes. It's worked rather well for me, since the advent of firearms anyway. Before that, I tried crossbows, and I'm afraid they really weren't to my taste. Poison works rather nicely as well."

"And here I thought you were a sportsman." Victor froze as he felt the cool kiss of steel against his neck, and Macleod's voice mocked him from behind. "Drop the gun."

It clattered to the floor, and Richie picked it up, levelling it at Victor. Niamh, however, simply walked around him and took the sword MacLeod held out for her. She swung it, relishing the sound the katana made as it cut through the air. Then she smiled at Victor, and carefully and deliberately repeated the same move with her left hand.

"You want my head?" she taunted. "Come and *take* it."

Duncan stepped back, removing the blade from Victor's neck. Victor removed his own blade from his coat, swinging it experimentally. "Do you think you could beat me with one hand tied behind your back, so to speak?"

"I think it's time you and I had a fair fight."

Richie slipped out from behind them, to stand at Duncan's side, the gun still in his hand. Duncan took it out of his hand, and removed the clip, as Richie seemed transfixed by the two opponents circling each other.

"Com on." Duncan tugged at his shoulder, heading out the door.

"But Mac—"

"She's challenged, and all we can do now it wait."

"But what if he—"

"Then he does. But either way, we go home." As the first clear chimes of steel against steel came from inside the warehouse, Richie kept looking back as they headed towards the car.

* * *

Darius looked up as the buzz hit him, his grey-green eyes anxious.

Niamh leaned in the doorway, smiling, and feeling a little— no, a *lot* guilty for the past twenty-four hours.

"After... after it was over, I walked. Bloody and bleeding, I walked along the river, thinking."

"Thinking about what?"

"All the women... all the strong immortal women, and the weak ones too. I was no better or worse than they were, really. Maybe I was just lucky. But I don't feel sorry for killing him. What a thing to be telling your father confessor..."

"A thing you are telling a friend who was worried about you."

"I rang Macleod before I came here. Richie paced a hole in the floor, apparently."

"So you're leaving?"

"I moved my ticket to Osaka up a week."

"I see."

"I'd love to stay... I really would, but I just can't right now. Not with everything spinning around in my head the way it is. I'll have a hard enough time going back to Himiko's without falling apart at the seems."

"You're not the falling apart type." Darius laughed.

"You overestimate me." Niamh shook her head, but cracked a smile anyway.

"Take care, poppet."

"I will miss you." She looked into those familiar eyes, and couldn't lie. "But I'll come back, soon. I promise." He clasped her hands, caressing her wrist with his thumb.

"I'll hold you to that, *niece*."

"Goodbye, old friend." Niamh impulsively hugged Darius, and he looked at first as if he didn't know what to do with her. Then he folded his arms around her, sighing. She pulled back, her mouth suddenly dry. He leaned forward to kiss her cheek and she looked into his clear grey-green eyes, searching. For something...

"Soon." She smiled.

Darius

Almost two thousand years ago
Midst bloodshed and chaos,
He could have taken Paris, but
Instead, took up the cross.

Just why he chose to give it up,
Nobody truly knows.
He never talked to me of why,
And he and I were close.

I met him as the English fought
The French and he did chide
Me, just because he found me there,
As always, taking sides.

And since I came to love him, and
Because he was so good,
I truly tried to change my life,
The way he thought I should.

But it became apparent soon
His life was not for me.
For I was born a warrior
And this I'll always be.

He was as wise a being as
Has walked upon this earth,
He taught me always to respect
Each human being's worth.

I think his gentle teachings did
Take root inside my brain;
Because when he was murdered,
They helped me live with the pain.

He was the greatest of us all;
His genius had no end;
But most important in my life,
I got to call him "friend"

by Kathleen Y. Bergeron

TARA 94

Thomas Brooks, Esquire
by Amy Denton

CONNOR MACLEOD WAS IN A rare good mood that day. His antique store was above profit margins, he was in Houston on a buying trip and no one had tried to take his head for weeks. He was almost ecstatic. To celebrate his good mood, he went to his favourite restaurant in Houston, The Taste of Texas, to enjoy a good steak, and in his opinion, The Taste of Texas had the best steaks in all of Houston.

The Taste of Texas was located at the intersection of State Highway 59 South, Interstate 45 North and the Sam Houston Tollway. The intersection of these three busy highways made getting there not for the faint of heart. The Taste of Texas was shaped like an old ranch house with a clapboard front and a brick rear. The inside was paneled with oak wood, stained to a dark hue. Old pictures of cattle and ranching hung on the walls. The large etched glass doors opened to admit people into the lobby of the restaurant.

Just past the podium a waist-high planter turned at a 95 degree angel to separate the first dining room from the lobby. In the back and to the right of the dining room lay the restrooms, phones, and the kitchen. To the right of the podium, across the walkway, in the corner, was the ever popular Rush Room. The Rush Room was a place where devotees of Rush Limbaugh could eat lunch and listen to him at the same time. Connor was not really for or against Rush, but he ate in there from time to time for variety.

A light breeze ruffled Connor's hair as he walked in the front door. He walked up to the podium, requested a table for one near the door, and then sat on the bench to wait. A few moments later, he was shown to a table right up against the planter. He ordered his lunch, steak medium rare, with just a bit of pink showing, baked potato, salad and a mug of good lager. He was enjoying the food, when he felt it, that faintly annoying buzz in his head, the signal that another Immortal was nearby. He looked up, glancing around the room, scanning for any sign that one of the other diners might be the one he had sensed. He looked across to the Rush Room, then over by the restrooms and phones. He glanced at the kitchen and finally the front door, searching for whomever was out there. Whoever had set him off. Seeing nothing, he returned to his lunch. He looked for an escape route, located it and continued to eat, his thoughts racing.

This is not what I need today, he thought. *Well, my luck was bound to run out sometime*. He thought of his sword, realising a moment later that it was under the seat in his car. He groaned inwardly and, having totally lost his appetite by then, pushed the half-full plate away to look around the restaurant again. *This is crazy*, he told himself, *no Immortal would dare start a fight in front of mortals. That's*

just common sense. Having their fights in private saved a lot of time explaining away things that hadn't really happened.

The point of a sword poking him in the arm jerked him back to reality. He looked up and blinked. A tall, muscular man with blond hair dressed in a T-shirt and jeans was at the other end of the sword. A broad sword that looked heavy, but the young man held it without wavering.

"I am Thomas Brooks and I am here for your head," the young man spoke clearly and quietly.

"Not here you're not," Connor retorted, "put that sword away before you attract any more attention to yourself."

The patrons were staring at the young man. Even in Houston, it was a bit strange for one man to hold up another with a sword, especially in front of witnesses. Connor half rose from his chair.

"Put that sword away and sit down, now! Before you have to explain what you're going to use it for."

"And if I don't?" the young man taunted.

"Then you can explain it to the police. And after they stop laughing and take you to the funny farm, you can explain to them as well. You might get out in the next 40 or 50 years, if you're lucky."

"What's 40 or 50 years to us? A drop in the bucket maybe?"

"And how will you explain why you're not aging then?"

The young man considered what Connor had said for a moment, then sat down across from Connor, balancing the sword across the two remaining chairs. Connor waved over a waiter who took the young man's order and left. Connor leant across the table and hissed, "What did you think you were doing? Challenging me in front of mortals? With your sword drawn, no less! What were you thinking? Don't you know better? How long have you been doing this?" He sat back scowling, the anger in his voice making his Scottish accent thicker.

"Long enough," was the laconic reply.

"Then you should know better. Our 'games' aren't for mortals. Has no one ever told you that? Don't you know the rules?" Connor's scowl deepened.

A sad smile crossed the face of the young man, only to be replaced with delight as he enjoyed Connor's anger. "Why? Why do we have to keep what we are a secret? Why can't we fight in front of mortals?" The young man seemed truly curious.

"Why don't pigs fly? Why don't chicken's bark? What an idiotic question. Why? Because mortals wouldn't understand, that's why. How would you explain the Quickening to them?" Connor looked around at the surrounding tables to make sure no one had overheard him. That was all he needed. Fortunately, the restaurant was busy, so their voices didn't carry. He glanced back at the young man, waiting for an answer.

"I would find a way," came his response. For a person determined to create a public spectacle, he certainly didn't say much.

Connor snorted and rolled his eyes. *I cannot believe this. I cannot believe that I have to explain the rules to him. Who taught him?* Connor shook his head slowly, as if trying to shake something loose. He waved down the waiter again, paid his bill with a credit card and stood up to leave. The patrons who had returned to their meals, glanced his way again for a moment, perhaps wondering if a repeat of the scene a few minutes ago was about to take place. As he left the table, he gave the young man his business card with his hotel phone number on the back of it. He told the young man to call if he wanted to discuss the matter further. The young man shrugged his shoulders, but accepted the card. Connor left mad beyond belief. It had started out to be such a nice day.

* * *

Ring! Ring! Connor walked around his hotel room holding the phone cradled in his hand, the ear piece to his right ear. He glanced out the window at the George R. Brown Convention Centre, then turned back toward the door. Shouldering the phone, he switched hands. He passed the bed on his right

along with the bathroom. The T.V. was to his left as well as a chest of drawers. He turned back toward the window.

Come on already, answer the damned phone, he thought, *I know someone is there. Answer the phone.* He paced some more, letting the phone ring and ring. He was about to hang up when, finally, someone on the other end picked up.

"He—ll-o...?" came the breathless reply.

Connor smiled. He had made Duncan run and not many people could do that.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Duncan. How are you?"

"Connor?"

"Yes."

"I ran all the way to the phone for *you*?"

"Yes. I hope I didn't make you hurry."

"No, I always like running up a flight of stairs and across the room to answer the phone." Sarcasm dripped from Duncan's voice. "What's going on? Why are you calling?" After a short pause, "Where are you?"

"Houston, shopping. Let me ask you a question."

"Shoot."

"Do you know, or have you ever heard of an Immortal named Thomas Brooks?"

"Hmm," there was a silence on the other end of the line as Duncan thought. "Can't say that I have," Duncan replied at last, "Nope, don't think I've ever heard of him. Why?"

"He challenged me today. In the middle of a very busy restaurant, in front of a lot of people. He wanted a fight then and there. Of course, I refused."

"You're kidding," disbelief evident in Duncan's voice.

"No, I'm not kidding. I was eating lunch, he came up to me and says he wants my head. Right there in the middle of the restaurant! I was stunned. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't believe it," Connor waved his left hand around the room for emphasis.

"Doesn't he know better?"

"I don't think he cares. He didn't seem too concerned. He was very cocky about it."

"Now where would he get that from?" Duncan teased his clansman.

"I would *never* be cocky about something like this. This is too important."

"True. What did you do?"

"I got him to sit down without creating too much of a scene. We talked and I left a few minutes later. I gave him my business card with my phone number here at the hotel and told him to call so we could discuss the matter further. If he calls, he calls. If not..." Connor shrugged his shoulders, "I didn't know what to do."

"Sounds like you had a lot of fun."

"Oh yeah. Lots."

"What does this guy look like?"

"You, with a shave and a hair cut," Connor smirked.

"Ha ha, very funny. I'm serious. I don't need him showing up and pulling this little stunt here. I've got enough problems as it is. Now, what does he look like?"

"Tall, about your height, short, blond hair, very sharp pronounced features. Kinda muscular."

"Noticed all that, huh?"

"When someone walks up to you and demands your head, you tend to notice what they look like," Connor said dryly.

"I'll bet. Listen, I hate to be rude and hang up on you, but I was supposed to be downstairs, oh, about," Duncan glanced at the watch on his wrist, "fifteen minutes ago. Charlie wants to work out with me. If I don't show, he'll be up here demanding to know why I'm not down there."

Connor chuckled, he hadn't met Charlie yet, but he didn't sound like the type that liked to be kept waiting.

"Okay, I'll let you go."

"Thanks for calling and telling me. I'll keep an eye out, ask around. See what I can find."

"Great."

"Give me your number at the hotel," Duncan ordered, looking for a piece of paper and a pen to write with.

"It's (713) 555-1283. Got it?"

"Yeah."

The two men exchanged good-byes and then hung up.

* * *

Ding-ding-ding. A small bell rang overhead when Duncan pushed open the door of Dawson's Rare Books. After talking to Connor, Duncan decided that the only person who might know about Thomas Brooks would be Joe Dawson, the head of the Watchers. He ran a small rare book store near downtown Vancouver.

The bookstore was on a side street, squeezed in between a row of townhouses and a small mom and pop grocery store. The bookstore was dimly lit. One large picture window at the front of the store provided most of the light in the shop. The walls on both sides were lined with floor-to-ceiling shelves, with the books arranged in alphabetical order. Moveable ladders leaned against the shelves so top shelves could be reached easily. Duncan walked back to the rear of the store, past a small counter/register. The girl behind the counter opened her mouth as if to say something, but Duncan moved by too quickly.

This place gives me claustrophobia, he thought, looking at the tall imposing shelves. Dawson's office was in the back, hidden by a small wooden door that, when closed, blended into the wall. Today it was almost closed, a small shaft of light shining through the crack. Duncan knocked once before poking his head around the door. The office was just like the rest of the store: small, dark and cramped. Bookshelves lined three of the four walls. Joe Dawson sat at an oak desk, neatly messy. A small green shaded lamp on the right side of the desk cast the only light in the room. A laptop computer sat on the left edge of the desk. A lighted magnifier, not currently being used, sat to the right of the desk.

"Come in," Joe Dawson didn't bother to look up from his desk where he sat working.

"Dawson, someone needs to introduce you to a wonderful invention called electricity. You would be amazed at what you can do with it." Duncan cracked, standing near the door. Dawson's head jerked up at the sound of the familiar voice. He stood up and moved to greet Duncan. "Duncan, what brings you here? What can I do for you?"

"Get some more lights for starters. What's the matter, haven't you heard about electricity?"

"What's wrong with the lights? We have enough. Too much light is bad for the books. Look, did you come to criticise the lighting, or do you want something?" Dawson moved back to his chair and motioned for Duncan to sit. "What can I do for you?" Dawson said, repeating himself. Duncan shifted in his seat, making himself comfortable.

"I would like to know what information you have on an Immortal named Thomas Brooks."

"Why do you ask?"

"That's personal."

"You're not going to tell me?"

"I can remember you wanting me to do something for you and not telling me about it."

"Turnabout is fair play. Hmmm?"

Duncan shrugged.

"All right, let me see what I have." Dawson pulled laptop over to him. Thomas Brooks, right?"

"Yeah, spelt B-R-O-O-K-S. I think."

"Hmm, I don't see anything..." Dawson scanned the computer screen, "Oh, wait. Here we are. Well, what do you know."

"What do you know?"

"Thomas Brooks. First death: May 18, 1812. Killed during the War of 1812. He's from Massachusetts, impressed into the British navy. The captain had him hanged from the yardarm then thrown overboard for stabbing the bosun. Kinda addled his brain. He likes to fight in public. There are three documented sightings. One in 1895, one in 1912, and one in 1936. Sort of a messy fighter."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Anything on where he lives or what he does?"

"No, sorry. Nothing but those three sightings. Wait a minute, here's something else." Dawson scanned the computer screen, "he's young, younger than 200. Fights with a broadsword and frequents sports bars, likes football. No teacher is known. That's all."

"Thanks, I appreciate it." Duncan stood and turned to leave.

"Anything else?"

"Lights." Duncan waved his hand and disappeared through the door.

* * *

"Mr. MacLeod? Mr. MacLeod, are you in there?" There was a knock at the door of Connor's hotel room. He turned from the dresser and looked at the clock on the night stand. It read 11:26 a.m. He had a meeting with Jason Slavin of Slavin's Antiques to look over his inventory and decide if there was anything he wanted. However, that wasn't until 12:30. *Now, who could that be?* he thought. It wasn't Thomas Brooks, he knew that for a fact.

"Mr. MacLeod, are you in there? I would like to speak with you for a few minutes." The door thumped loudly. Connor frowned. He was only half dressed. His shirt wasn't tucked in, his cuffs weren't buttoned and his tie wasn't tied.

"Mr. MacLeod, please. I haven't got all day."

I might as well find out who it is, Connor thought. "Who is it?" he yelled at the door, looking in the mirror tying his tie.

"My name is Stephen Taylor, I'm a detective with the Houston Police Department. I'm here to talk to you about...Mr. MacLeod, may I come in? I don't want to discuss this through a hotel door." Connor muttered to himself as he walked to the door.

"Mr. MacLeod, please..."

Connor sighed and opened the door, glaring at the detective in what he hoped was an intimidating stare.

"Yes," he snapped, "what do you want?"

Detective Stephen Taylor opened his mouth to say something, but thought better of it and closed his mouth. *They don't pay me enough to do this*, he thought facing the obviously annoyed Connor.

"Yes," Connor repeated himself. "As you said, I haven't got all day."

"May I come in? I prefer not to discuss this matter standing in the hallway."

Connor shrugged and let the detective in. "Well," he said, shutting the door behind the detective, "what can I do for you?"

"I'm here in regard to the uh...'skirmish' that took place yesterday afternoon at The Taste of Texas between you and an unidentified man." Detective Taylor looked at his notes to see if he had missed anything. Seeing no omissions, he looked up at Connor again.

"Skirmish?" A small smile tugged at the edges of Connor's face, "Now there's a word I haven't heard in a long time." He was standing in front of the mirror, again buttoning his cuffs and tucking in his shirt, "What 'skirmish' are you referring to, detective?" He knew *exactly* what skirmish the detective was talking about.

"I'm talking about the man who supposedly came up to you and," he paused, "demanded your head."

Damn, someone overheard. This makes things more complicated. Connor turned from the mirror and bent to pick his jacket up off the bed.

"He was just trying to get my attention, that's all. I'm an antique dealer and we antique dealers are a strange breed. He's a collector who came to show me a sword from his collection in which I had expressed interest. I wanted to see it so I could decide whether or not I wanted to buy it."

"Uh huh," Detective Taylor made some notes on a pad he was holding. "Did you buy it?"

"The sword? No, it was not what I was looking for. Unfortunately."

"Do you have a phone number or an address for this 'collector'?"

"No, he's a bit of a recluse. No phone and no address that I know of. That's why I met him at the restaurant."

Detective Taylor fixed him with a look of utter disbelief. Connor shrugged.

"I'm sorry, I know it sounds strange, but it's the truth."

"Do you know his name?"

Connor turned one of his most innocent smiles on Detective Taylor. "No, sorry, I don't. I meet so many people in my line of work, unless I have a business deal with them, I don't remember who they are."

Detective Taylor frowned, "Mr. MacLeod, I think you're trying to hide something." Connor's face changed from one of innocence to one of menace. He steered the detective toward the door.

"Look, Detective Tyler—"

"—Taylor."

"—Taylor, I'm sorry if you don't believe me. I'm sorry you came down here. You wasted both your time and mine. I'd like to talk longer, but I have an appointment in," Connor glanced at the clock on the bedside table. It read 11:46, "half an hour. So unless you have any more questions, or are going to take me in, I would appreciate your leaving. Good day, detective."

Connor gave Detective Taylor a firm shove into the hall and shut the door in the stunned officer's face.

"Antique dealer, my ass," Detective Taylor muttered to himself, "I've got him now. I'll bug his phone, warrant or no warrant."

* * *

The ringing phone could be heard through the hotel door as Connor fumbled to get his room key out. He left the door open and grabbed the phone on the fifth ring.

"Hello?"

"Connor?"

"Yes?"

"Finally! I have been trying to get a hold of you since yesterday evening. Where have you been?"

"Duncan, is that you?"

"No, it's the Easter Bunny! Yes, it's me. Where have you been?"

"Out. Finishing business. Right now I'm standing in my hotel room with the door wide open. Do you mind if I close it?" He didn't wait for a reply. He put the phone on the bed, shut the door and took off his tan overcoat. Connor sat down on the bed and then picked up the phone.

"You say you've been trying to reach me since last night?"

"Since about 7:00 last night. I was beginning to wonder."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to worry you. I don't have any messages. Nothing from the front desk and nothing on the phone either. Did you try this morning?"

"Yes. Once at around 9:00, once at around 10:00 and once at around noon."

"That's weird. I was here until noon. I did have breakfast at around 9:30, but other than that...I'll see what the problem is. Why are you calling?" Silence on the other end.

"Duncan?"

"I'm calling you back to tell you about your friend Thomas Brooks."

"This fast? Who did you talk to?"

"I have my ways."

"Oh. What did you find?"

"Uh oh, hang on, let me find it. I wrote it down." The sound of rustling paper on the other end of the phone. "Thomas Brooks, first killed in the War of 1812. Impressed into the British navy. The captain hanged him for stabbing the bosun. Threw him overboard. Probably scrambled his mind. Didn't have a teacher. That's probably why he challenged you."

"Great. Anything else?"

"Hangs out in sports bars, likes football. He's a messy fighter, supposedly."

"Does he normally fight in public?"

"Well, there have been three reported times when he has."

"Is that all?"

"Yep, that's all."

"Thanks for getting me the information. Oh, by the way, speaking of Mr. Brooks, I had the nicest conversation with a detective from the Houston Police Department this morning."

"Don't tell me, let me guess. He wanted to know why this Thomas Brooks person tried to hold you up with a sword in public, right?"

"Now how did you guess?"

"I'm psychic. What did you tell him?"

"As little as possible. He wanted to know his name, address, phone, all that. And you know, I just couldn't remember what they were."

"Didn't like that, did he?"

"He said he thought I was trying to hide something."

"I wonder why?" Duncan's voice dripped with sarcasm.

Connor laughed, "Gee, I just don't know. I'm going to go now and find out what happened to my missing messages."

"What makes you think you have any?" Duncan asked, chuckling.

"Cute, real cute. Good-bye Duncan."

"Bye. Oh, hey, wait! Call me and tell me what happens, alright?"

"Sure, ok. Bye."

* * *

Connor walked up to the registration desk in the hotel and looked. The desk was deserted. He glanced around the lobby. It was full of people, but no one who worked there. *You would think that a hotel like the Four Seasons would have people at the registration desk,* he thought. He looked for a bell to ring...no bell. He stood at the desk for a moment longer then turned to leave. As if by magic, a young man about 20 years in age, dressed in a dark suit with matching tie, appeared out of nowhere behind him.

"May I help you?" he asked pleasantly.

"Yes. I just discovered that a relative of mine has been trying to reach me for the past two days. He finally did, this afternoon, but he says he left at least three messages on the phone and there weren't any here," Connor said, patting the desk, "when I checked last night. Could you please check again?"

"Certainly, what is your room number, sir?"

"582."

The young clerk turned to the row of message boxes behind him. He looked and, after locating the right one, saw that there were no messages in it. The clerk turned back around and said, "Sorry. There are no messages. Are you sure your relative left messages?"

Connor nodded his head, "What about the phone?"

"Oh well, that service isn't working right now."

Connor made a face. Duncan wasn't lying, he knew that. *What was going on?* The clerk noticing Connor's frustration, offered, "Sir, perhaps someone came by and got them for you. When did your relative call?"

Connor told him and the clerk went off to find the person who worked the nightshift. That clerk told Connor that his 'personal assistant' had picked up the messages. This surprised Connor because he didn't have a personal assistant. He had a good idea, however, who *had* taken them. He set the clerk straight and left.

* * *

The phone rang as Connor packed. He answered it on the 3rd ring. "What?"

"Did I disturb you?" the voice on the other end said teasingly. "Who is this?" Connor asked, frowning.

"You've forgotten me? I'm crushed. It's Thomas Brooks."

"Oh, it's you." Connor sat down on the edge of the bed, "I was wondering if I would ever hear from you."

"Yes, and since you seem to have something against doing this in a public place, I've decided to move it."

Connor rolled his eyes, this person annoyed him greatly. "Where and when?"

"Your hotel, the roof, at 3:00 a.m."

"Done. I'll be there." The phone clicked as he hung up.

Unbeknownst to Connor, there was a second click as Detective Taylor's phone tap disconnected the tape. He made a note to appear on the rooftop as well... there was no way Taylor was going to miss this.

* * *

The air was cold and crisp at the top of the hotel when Connor stepped out onto the roof from the stairwell. Two ventilation shafts rose above the flat roof. He paused, his hand on the doorknob, looking for anyone who shouldn't be there. He completely missed Detective Taylor hiding behind the stairwell. His Katana lay hidden under his overcoat, but it was easily reachable. He stepped away from the door, leaving it open. He was not more than six steps away when he felt *it*. He spun to the left, overcoat fanning out, his Katana flashing out of its hiding place, blocking an attack from Thomas Brooks.

"Very nice," Connor remarked, his eyes locked with Thomas', his sword still blocking the other sword. "But you know you can't sneak up on me. Why did you try?" He gave Thomas a shove backwards. Thomas stumbled and fell. Connor stood where he was, sword held in one hand, pointed almost casually at Thomas.

"Why?" he repeated.

"Because," Thomas charged Connor, sword flashing. Connor dodged out of the way.

"Because?" The two men circled each other.

"Because, you were so surprised that I was trying to sneak up on you that it gave me an advantage."

"Really?" The two men stopped circling, "I'm impressed. You fight well for someone who had no teacher. Where did you learn?"

Thomas' mouth opened slightly and his eyes grew wide. "How...how...how did you know?" Connor smiled, amused that his words had such an effect on his opponent.

"I have my sources." Connor shrugged. He, unlike Thomas, kept his sword raised. He thought he heard something coming from far off, but he couldn't be sure. He had more important matters to think about. Thomas stared at Connor a moment longer, emotions playing out across his face. Finally, anger settled on him and he charged. Around and around the two men went, the sound of metal on metal ringing through the clear night air.

Unbeknownst to them, Detective Taylor watched, hidden, eyes wide. He thought of stepping out and stopping the two, but didn't. His backup could do that. He could see the shorter of the two clearly, but the taller one's face was hidden, but he swords. He watched a few more minutes and then all hell broke

loose. The Houston Police Department helicopter appeared as if by magic and bathed the two combatants in a pool of bright light. Thomas froze, unable to move. Connor, on the other hand, not wishing to explaining the situation, backed away slowly, keeping his face hidden and his eyes on the helicopter. He was so preoccupied with trying to not be caught, he didn't see Detective Taylor step out of the shadows and stick a gun in his back.

"Drop it," Detective Taylor ordered shortly. Connor dropped the sword, closed his eyes, put his hands up and muttered something in Gaelic. Before the detective could tell him to turn around, Connor heard a thump and a thud as the detective dropped to the ground unconscious. Connor turned and gazed at the unconscious detective. He glanced back over his shoulder, saw the police arresting Thomas, and disappeared down the stairwell. He just barely escaped being caught.

* * *

Four hours later, Connor boarded his return flight to New York City. His luggage, including the Katana, was safely stowed in the belly of the plane. He quickly found his seat and started to drift off to sleep, trying to catch up on missed sleep from the night before. He still wondered about who or what had knocked out the detective as he was dropping off. The conversation in front of him woke him up.

"You aren't going to believe what I saw on the news this morning." Two businessmen sat in front of Connor, the one on the aisle speaking first.

"What'd ya see?" the second one asked.

"H.P.D. broke up a sword fight on top 'a The Four Seasons this morning!"

"When?"

"According to the newsman, about 3:45 a.m."

3:00 a.m. Connor corrected silently.

"Really? Who'd they catch?"

"Well, there were two men, but one got away. They don't know what the other one looks like."

"The one who got away?"

"Umhum. The one they caught refused to talk, according to the news."

And he won't if he knows what's good for him, Connor thought darkly.

"Man, I thought I'd seen it all. Guess not, huh?"

"Makes you wonder what this world is coming to, don't it?"

"Yeah."

You don't know the half of it, Connor thought. The two men switched topics and Connor finally got the sleep he had missed the night before.

A Roll in the Hay
by Jo Leahy

SOMEONE WAS GIGGLING in the hay loft.

Aidan crouched father down in the stall where he was supposed to be currying one of the inn's guests' horses.

Supposed to be being the operative words. He was curious as the devil to see what his sister Brigid was up to. She was supposed to be inside helping their Ma get the common room scrubbed in time for supper.

Correction. Two someone's were giggling. That was definitely a different giggle than Brigid's high pitched giggle. That was a man's giggle.

Aidan didn't think men giggled. This was all very new and interesting to him, especially the other sounds he couldn't quite identify.

* * *

Duncan rolled over, cursing the mouldy smelling straw that had crept between his linen shirt and skin, scratching almost as much as Brigid had. She raked her nails across the exposed part of his chest, nibbling his chin, and he just had to laugh. She was very enthusiastic.

"And how many were there before me, Duncan MacLeod?"

"Never a one, rose."

"Ah, you're a terrible liar. You must have had *years* of practice to be doing that to a girl so well."

Duncan had stopped at the inn thinking only of a hot bath, a good meal, and a night's rest.

That was before Brigid had gotten into the tub with him. The bold approach worked for her, he had to admit. He had extended his stay two days on account of he hadn't met anyone as bold as she in many a year.

"I'm not a jealous one, you can be telling me."

"Why are you so curious?" Duncan was absolutely delighted, and annoyed at the same time. He hadn't had questions from his tumbles in quite a while. Questions made him think too much. But Brigid was a sweet girl, and clever too, so he was willing to forgive her more than most.

"You're a man of the world, Duncan MacLeod, I was knowing that much from the moment I set my eyes on you. I've never left this village in my entire life."

"All seventeen years?"

"Don't you be mocking me, Duncan Macleod." Her habit of calling him by his full given name at every other sentence could become annoying if it weren't for the dimple in her chin and the way her eyes flashes beneath her tumble of blue black curls. He could live with it. "I was married and widowed in less than two summers, and that's a lifetime, I'll be telling you."

"And why would you be wanting to know how many there have been before?" Duncan leaned over her, his chin in his hand, a silly smile playing about his face. Brigid made him feel young with her ceaseless and odd questions, for all his two hundred years.

"'Tis a curious thing, to me. Working in the common room, one would have to be deaf not to know the nature of men's exploits."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. You're free," Brigid pronounced with a great sigh.

"Me personally, or men in general?"

"The lot of you." She waved her hand to denote his gender in its entirety. "You can do anything, anything you're wanting to do if it's not breaking the laws, and even then... I think I would have been born a man."

"I think I like you better born the way you were." Duncan grazed her shoulder with his teeth, but she pushed his head away, laughing.

"Aye, and I'm serious! I'll never leave this town, or more likely this inn, until my dying day. But if I were a man... well, everything would be different then. And I wouldn't be worrying about such things as what my father would do if he caught the two of us, here."

"If you were a boy, yes you would."

"Must you turn everything into a jest, Duncan MacLeod?"

"Must you be so serious?"

"Do you never think on it?"

"What, if I were a man?"

"No, you oaf. What kind of freedom you have."

Duncan's eyes became shadowed. "Every freedom has its price."

"You have the look of a man who's paid some high prices, an I'm not being mistaken."

"Has anyone ever told you you are entirely too clever for your own good?"

"Aye, they have. And I don't believe a word of it. You can't be being too clever, that's my way of thinking."

"Do you know what I wish for?"

"Ah, now I'm be having the truth, is that it?"

"Yes, now hush and let me tell you." He smiled, but it faded as he got a rather lost look, as if he was seeing something very far away and hard to make out. "I would have a wife like you, and perhaps run an inn like this one. And I would have children to bounce on my knee, and I would never touch a sword again."

"What's stopping you?" Brigid wondered if she had just heard a marriage proposal, or a man's sweetest forbidden dream.

"More than I could ever explain, rose." Duncan sighed into her hair.

"Now why do I feel as if I've been offered a taste of what's true, and only that?" She sat up and began to pick stubborn, clinging hay out of her hair and clothes. She didn't seem annoyed, just a little wistful.

"Brigid, rose... I wish I could be telling you more."

"Aye, and I know your kind, Duncan MacLeod. I'll be having no more of the truth from you this day." She smiled, if a little sadly, and started down the ladder.

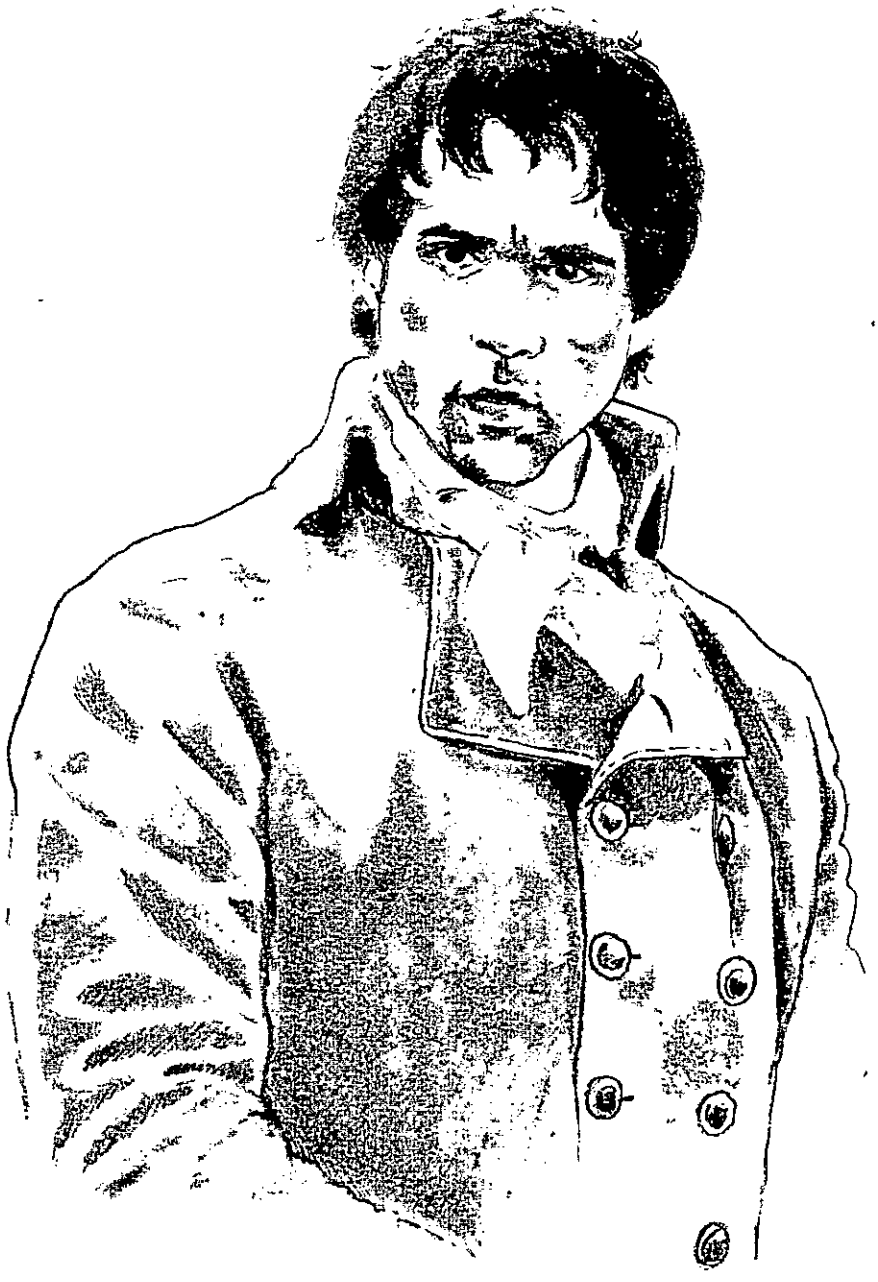
Duncan sighed, and started the task of putting himself to rights again. Brigid's father was a large man, with beefy fists that would bruise and break him easily enough, even if it would heal within hours. It would still hurt like hell, and more than that, it would hurt Brigid.

As he started feet first down the ladder, he caught a glimpse of a bright-as-copper red head crouched in the corner of a stall. He chuckled. He remembered pulling similar stunts when he was roughly the same age, oh-so-long ago in the Highlands. He seemed to remember his foster-cousin Morag had been the favourite subject for this type of sport, and looking back he admitted he had learned rather a lot that way, thanks to Morag and her appetites.

He would leave the inn tomorrow, and Brigid and her family behind not because he wanted to, but because he was far too tempted to try and stay forever. And for him, forever was a very long time. Better it just stay a roll in the hay, and be done with, or else his heart wouldn't be the only one breaking.

Suddenly I knew that you'd have to go
My world was not yours, your eyes told me so
Yet it was there I felt the crossroads of time
And I wondered why.

- Loreena McKennitt, "The Old Ways"



TARA 94

A Change of Perspective
by Selma McCrory

SHE COULD HEAR the clash of the swords nearby. She quietly slipped past the rows of boxes to peek out the warehouse door. Outside, in the night, a man and a woman were furiously battling it out. Greer could not see the details of the swordfight well enough from where she was, and she dared not ease any further out for fear of being seen by the contestants. Although it was possible that they would not see her if she moved, she had been told enough times about others who had made that mistake and had gotten killed for their trouble. Observing in this setting, with no others around to keep her from sticking out, was very dangerous. However, she needed to record this fight, record it in writing for posterity. Spotting a higher vantage point, she climbed onto a stack of small boxes. She was being very careful, since the lights seemed to be out in that section of the warehouse. The dark would hide her better, but if she was not careful, she could fall and seriously injure herself. As she reached the vantage point, she missed the box that would have allowed her a sure foothold. She grabbed a nearby black cord for balance, and realized she had made a big mistake. For a few seconds, she was paralysed, and then, nothing.

* * *

She could gradually see the light from behind her eyelids. She felt faintly sore, but that feeling was decreasing by the minute. Under her, she could feel concrete, except for her head, which seemed to be cushioned by something. She opened her eyes and saw the ceiling of the warehouse. She was lying on the warehouse floor, a fair distance from the darkened area where she had last been. A shadow fell across her and she looked towards the source.

A woman was standing there. As Greer raised her head to look at the woman's half-shadowed form, the woman looked at her and smiled gently. "Hello," the woman said. She was a delicate beauty, with long blond hair reaching down to her shoulders and sadness in her hazel eyes. She kneeled down by Greer, who struggled to remember that the woman's name was Alberta, and that she had been one of the participants in the swordfight outside. "Hello," Greer responded. She tried to get up, but felt groggy. She saw the woman move in to help.

The woman gently hauled her up to a sitting position, and helped her stay up by holding a strong arm against her back. "You'll be all right," the woman told her.

"What happened?" Greer asked her anxiously.

"I was nearby, and I heard a loud crash. When I got here, you were partially on those boxes up there," the woman said, pointing at some boxes that were in disarray. Greer looked up and discerned the black cable hanging so innocently from the ceiling. She looked back at the woman. She thought, *What can I do? I can't tell her the truth.* The woman looked at her, obviously concerned. Greer brushed her bangs aside, pausing for a moment. "I was getting something from here. I climbed up to get a box, and I slipped. I grabbed a cable," she paused again, trying to look confused, not that she was having much trouble with that. "I don't remember anything after that, except when I woke up. I guess you saved my life."

"I didn't do much. Just as I said, I found you on the boxes, took you down, and made you comfortable." the woman said. Her smile then faded, replaced by a somewhat businesslike look. "What's your name?"

"Georgina Lewis, but I go by Greer," Greer told her. She felt in her pockets for her wallet. The woman looked briefly sheepish and handed her wallet back.

"Alberta Barrow."

Greer tried to keep her alarm from showing in her face. *Why is she introducing herself by Alberta, rather than her current pseudonym, Alicia Marriner?* she thought. Then she knew. She covered up by saying, "Will you help me? I need to see a doctor."

"Greer, wait," Alberta said in a commanding tone.

Greer had shifted to get up, but stopped at Alberta's voice. Her heart was pounding as she guessed what had happened to her, and what she knew. She focused on Alberta as if the other woman were her lifeline. "I need to talk to you. I need to tell you some things. You don't need a doctor," Alberta spoke almost to herself. Greer didn't particularly care to hear the words, but she did her best to shift somewhat forward, as if to listen to the woman's words. She reminded herself that no one else had heard the discussion before from an immortal, although she remembered several tales about how that information had been gleaned. Her thoughts helped. "You'll excuse me, I've never had to do this before," Alberta said as she sat down, leaning her back against a large box.

"Take your time," Greer told her. She needed a moment herself to think about what was going on, and reconciling it with what she knew. Alberta took a deep breath. "Well, you didn't survive the electrocution. However, you're still alive." Alberta held a hand up, although Greer had done nothing to indicate that she was going to. "I'll answer your questions later, so please don't interrupt."

Greer nodded to Alberta, who went on, slowly talking as if to chose her words carefully.

"When you died, you changed. There is only one way for you to die now. You can die if someone beheads you. You won't age, you won't get sick. You can be damaged, but you will always heal."

Greer cocked her head more in Alberta's direction.

"And people will come after you, to kill you. You are now immortal. You are now one of us. And you are now part of the Game."

Greer didn't need any acting to be shocked. *I am a part of this now*, she thought. *I didn't think this would ever happen.* Alberta told her about the Quickening, and the Prize, which Greer already knew about from her studies. None of it was new to her. Still, she wondered if she could take killing another person, threat or no. Her thoughts wandered off as she tried to correlate what she knew to what was happening. Alberta's voice cut into her thoughts. "Are you alright? Can you understand what I've said?"

Greer shrugged off her thoughts and responded. "I'm fine, and I understand you, but I'm having a little trouble with the idea."

"You'll have time to learn," Alberta said. Then she drummed her fingers on her chin, looking briefly towards the ceiling. "You'll have to learn to fight. I'll teach you."

"I know how to fight."

"With a sword?" Alberta asked. Greer involuntarily blanched. "Um, no."

"Well, if you know how to fight, that's good," Alberta nodded, then looked at her seriously. "However, you need to learn to fight with a sword. It's easier to decapitate someone with a sword than with your bare hands."

"Will I have to fight? To kill people?" Greer remembered, a long time ago, when she had seen her first swordfight, a bit before she had joined the group. The fight had been so savage. The two immortals had blood all over them. She had stood frozen in place, even when the one had decapitated the other and the park had exploded. She thought of the warning she was given later, during her training: that if an immortal ever spotted you watching during a fight, you might as well have been dead. She dragged her attention back to Alberta, and what Alberta was saying.

"Yes. Even if you don't go after anyone, people will come after you. It's best, sometimes, to go after those who would harm you." Greer wondered if she was going crazy. She turned her head away, and studied a box on the other side of the corridor. *I read about swashbucklers when I was a child,* she thought. She couldn't quite admit to herself that although she had long seen the swordfights realistically, she was still too much the romantic, she had always liked the good guys going after the bad guys. Alberta, according to her file, fit Greer's ideas nicely.

She looked back at Alberta, who was looking at her in a motherly way. "We'll talk a little more, when you have time to think. I know I have told you a lot of unbelievable things," Alberta said. "I'll help you home." Alberta helped Greer up from the floor. She leaned down, grabbed the bundle of cloth that had been serving as Greer's pillow, and shook it out. It turned out to be a beautiful black trenchcoat. Greer was briefly concerned that Alberta would notice that she had no car, but Alberta was cheerfully commenting to her about how she thought the weather was nice and warm that night. She was ushered into Alberta's car, a late 70's Firebird, which stood out with its red sports stripes against the white body. Alberta drove her home, and she would have been more interested in the woman's discussion if she didn't have her own thoughts to pursue. When she got home, Alberta looked at the place like she was fixing it in her memory. She was then asked for her phone number, which she gave quickly, only wanting her bed and an escape from the nightmare which she seemed to be going through.

* * *

Greer sat on the couch. She looked at her tattoo on her bared left wrist, and sighed sadly. She remembered the time when she had been so proud, staring for hours when she had not been busy happily tracking immortals. *I wish I could be so happy now.*

Her friend, Matt, who was a fellow Watcher, had joked once that Greer would be lousy at anything but watching immortals. She knew this was true, since she was good at what she did, and seemed attracted to immortals. *Well, now I know why*, she thought. Her eyes were clouding up with tears as she remembered all the friends she had made, friends that shared a common purpose in life.

Who could she call upon for friends, now? She knew that immortals were fairly lonely people, outliving most of their loved ones. Indeed, Alberta was a typical case, although her loneliness was due to being stuck on the frontier, surviving through the attack that had killed her husband. Greer didn't know if she could be a friend to Alberta, since she was afraid that she would accidentally reveal her past to her.

Greer pulled herself out of her thoughts. She had plenty of things to do besides mope in her apartment all day. Just because she had become immortal didn't mean that she didn't need to run the dishwasher, or water the plants. Taking her watering can out of the cabinet, she filled it with water and stepped outside to water the spider plant hanging on her back porch. As she was watering the plant, she stopped suddenly, looking around while keeping the watering can up. She looked around for the cause of the chill running down her spine again. She saw a man approach her, a handsome, lean man with brown hair and brown eyes, with tan slacks and a grey shirt. He looked oddly familiar, and then Greer was shocked to realize that the last time she had seen him, he had been wearing a trenchcoat and wielding a sword. *Leland*, she thought, instinctively naming him. He stopped at the edge of her porch.

"I want to talk to you," he said. She backed up, and when he moved closer, tried to hit him with her watering can. The plastic did little damage, and he easily wrestled it from her grasp. He had her arm by this time, and it was Greer's only consolation that he had stepped within range of her overwatered plant, and was getting wet. He grimaced and hauled her inside.

Greer looked at him in terror. "Who are you? And why are you here?" Leland gave her an amused look as he let her go. He made himself comfortable on her couch, and looked at the water stains on his clothes. He looked back up at Greer, who was frozen in place.

"This is better. We can discuss business without any mortals peeping in."

Mortals? she thought, then realized that he was talking to her as another immortal.

"Well, I should introduce myself. I'm Leland. Your friend Alberta will no doubt tell you about me. I know who you are. I investigated after I followed her and saw her take you here," he said. He got up, after he rearranged his clothes a little. "I will not stay long. I just want to tell you to tell your teacher that if she does not stop going for my head, I will take off yours first."

She backed towards the front door, and he followed her towards it. "You're mad!" she said, her eyes opening wide.

He gave a slight smile. "No, Henry VI was insane. I was fortunate enough to only spend even that one year under his reign, when I was a child," he told her. Then he frowned, turning serious. "This is the Game. Or hasn't she told you that part yet? If she hasn't, she should. This world is not a nice place."

He advanced on her. Suddenly, she was enveloped in his arms. He kissed her. She quaked, and he smiled at her, like a benevolent monarch. "I have always liked stealing kisses. Almost as nice as stealing Quickenings," he said, and then his smile dropped, and he started looking around. Greer caught herself doing the same, suddenly, as the chill sped down her spine again.

Alberta stepped through the open door. She saw Leland and pulled her sword out. Leland shifted Greer so that he was holding her in one arm as a shield while he got his own sword out. Greer started hyper-ventilating as his sword touched her neck.

In an instant, Leland lowered his sword and thrust Greer towards Alberta. He glared at both of them, and then went through the front door, slamming it. Alberta held Greer for a few moments while Greer regained her mental and physical balance. She was glad to see Alberta's concerned face.

"You're all right?" Alberta asked.

Greer nodded, but sat down on her couch. Alberta was nodding to herself, looking rueful.

"I should have known he'd do that. It's a common tactic, threatening your opponents' loved ones."

"Why?" Greer asked, confused. Then she nearly slapped her hand against her forehead as Alberta spoke.

"Because you make your opponent upset. If you are upset, the easier it is for you to make a mistake. If you make a mistake, you're dead."

"Why me? Why did this have to happen to me?" Greer asked the world around her. Alberta looked at her sharply.

"You are what you are. You can't change it. I've survived through centuries of this, and so can you."

"How old are you?"

Alberta smiled, and sat down on the couch beside her. "I just turned 235." Greer knew this, but put on a startled look. Alberta added, "You'll get used to it. Most, if not all of your opponents will be older than you." Alberta opened her mouth to speak further, but the phone rang. "Hello, Greer." Michael, her supervisor, was calling. Greer started to smile and relax, and then she remembered who was in her living room. "Oh, hi, Michael. Just a moment." Greer put the phone down on the kitchen counter and turned to Alberta, blushing. "Um...could you step out for a moment? This is a private matter."

Alberta nodded, looking thoughtful, and walked out the back door, closing it. Greer picked the phone up. "I'm back. What's up? I have a guest." Well, a couple of things. Business first. Have you been keeping track of Alberta Barrow?"

"Yes," she said, managing to keep her voice professional. She was glad that he was not there, or he would be able to tell that she was lying. Somehow, he had always been able to tell.

"Robert lost Leland, but he was headed in your general direction. We know that he and Alberta Barrow are after each other, so you may see him. Contact Robert if you do."

"Ok," she said, calmed by the routineness of the request. However, she knew Michael too well to think that was it. "What else?"

"Robert says that someone made a tremendous racket in the warehouse during the fight last night. He also said that he saw you framed in the doorway. He also saw Alberta Barrow go in. Then he followed Leland, who ran away. What happened? Are you okay? Did she find you?" Michael's voice was warm, but concerned.

"I'm fine, except I'm just embarrassed because I knocked some boxes over and made noise. I saw her run in, but I hid and she missed me."

"But you're not hurt?" he asked, still obviously concerned. "Just my pride," she said, hopefully cheerfully.

"That's good. If you keep up with this, you might have to be promoted to a desk position."

"That'll be the day I die," she told Michael, laughing. Since she had already died, she didn't have to worry about being promoted. He laughed, obviously relieved. "Yes, it will. You have room for dinner in a couple of nights?"

"Yeah, I should be free by then. Going to propose to me?"

"I just might, this time."

"OK, how about next Monday, at eight?"

"Sounds good to me. See you then."

"I will. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Greer hung the phone up, grinning. Michael always found a way to crack her up. She hoped that nothing radical would happen in her life before then, for she really wanted to talk to him face to face. Maybe she could convince Michael to remain a friend even though they were now on opposite sides of the line.

Alberta knocked on the glass door to the patio. Greer had temporarily forgotten about her. She flushed with embarrassment and let Alberta in. Alberta held a long, slim case in her hands.

"Sorry about that, Alberta."

"That's all right. Old boyfriend?"

Greer laughed. "Current boyfriend. We're having dinner on Monday."

"Good for you." Alberta said, and smiled wistfully. She hefted the case she was holding. "While you were talking to him, I got the chance to run to my car," she told Greer, and held the case out to her. Greer took the case from her and opened it, almost dropping it in surprise. Inside was a sword, a gold-tinged rapier.

"I took this from another immortal I defeated. I meant to use it as a backup sword, but it will do just as good for you. Guard it well. It has to become a friend, or you will never survive."

Greer continued staring at the sword. She tried to prevent herself, but she could not. *My own sword?* she thought.

"Now, let's teach you to use it. Come on, I know somewhere we can practice," Alberta told her, apparently amused as Greer stared at it. Greer was barely able remember to close the case back up. She automatically locked the back and front doors. Alberta hauled her to the car.

* * *

Alberta and Greer sat on the ground. Greer was tired. Alberta had taught her what she called the "basic moves," and Greer found that it was quite tiring work.

She now knew how to hold a sword. She knew how to block a swing, and she knew how to swing towards the right spot. She also learned what not to do, such as get enthusiastic and overextend. And

for the moment, she had to deal with Alberta's sword coming near her neck every couple of minutes. Greer wondered briefly if she was dreaming all of the things that had happened to her. She was always dazzled with the swordfights she had seen, although now she knew why the victors seemed so tired.

She listened to Alberta, who was lost in memory. She kept talking about Silas, her mentor. "He taught me how to fight, although he said I was good with an axe. Quite slow and clumsy, since I was used to hacking firewood, not people. You would have liked him. In fact, if he were still alive, I'd seek him out and have him train you."

"He's dead?"

"Yes. He died, in 1846. Leland killed him. That's why I'm after Leland. He has to be stopped. He's killed quite a few of us, all immortals who would have left him alone."

"1844," Greer muttered. She wouldn't have thought that Alberta's memory would be so bad. *Things must get blurry over two hundred years, even for an immortal,* she thought.

"Yes, that's right, 1844," Alberta continued blissfully. Then confusion crossed her face. "How did you know that? I know I didn't tell you." Greer was not expecting Alberta to draw her sword and place it against her neck. She stayed frozen while trying to come up with what to say. She finally sighed.

"Oh, dear," Greer said. "Alberta, I'm not your enemy. How I know, well, that's going to take some explaining."

The sword was removed from across Greer's neck, but it still stayed threateningly near. "This had better be good."

"Where do I start?" Greer wondered to herself. Then she had an idea. She pushed up her sleeve until the tattoo on her wrist was bared. She showed her tattoo to Alberta, who appeared puzzled.

"I am part of an organization called the Watchers," she told Alberta. "We have been watching and recording the history of the immortals for centuries. No one is sure where we started. We always record and do not interfere. We are trained to watch and to be inconspicuous." Greer rested her hands on her knees so the tattoo was still in sight. "I watch for a couple of months, then am pulled off so that the person that I am watching does not spot me. I carry this tattoo, as I have for thirteen years, to tell other Watchers that I am one too. Or was."

She looked at Alberta square in the face. "I was assigned to watch you when you arrived here a couple of weeks ago. I know where you've eaten, what you've done, what has happened to you," Greer said, starting to wave her hands in the air, as she often did while talking. " I know about your history, since I read your file before I started following you. I also know about Leland. I know the Watcher, Robert, that's watching him." Greer fell silent, unsure what else to tell Alberta. She knew that she could not betray much more than what she had said. Alberta looked down, and then back up, her face a mixture of curiosity and rage. "How long...how far do my records go back?"

"I think the records go back to 1788, although I know someone was able to piece together the date for your first death in 1783," Greer said. Inwardly she wondered, *how do you tell someone that they've been constantly watched for a couple of centuries?*

Alberta's expression was thoughtful, and she was silent for a couple of minutes. "So you are not watching me any more," she said finally. "No." Greer said. She spoke plainly and honestly, as she wanted Alberta to understand her position. "I stopped watching the minute I woke up again in the warehouse. However, they don't know that."

"But you're still reporting in."

"I'm feeding false reports. I really hate feeding false reports, but I have no choice, you understand?" Greer looked downcast and confused. "My closest friends are all Watchers. I wander around so much following immortals, that my friends all have to understand what I'm doing."

"I've got a few friends that aren't Watchers, but it's hard to keep up a friendship when you're travelling all the time. I hardly get to see my family, except at odd times," she said, sighing. She thought of all the family meetings she had missed during the years.

"I've known Robert for the last 5 years, on and off, since we've worked together before. Ditto for Michael. He's my supervisor for this current job. We used to talk a lot about getting married. I wonder if I should talk to him. I guess I can't now."

"Maybe someday, you'll be able to talk to him." Alberta told her consolingly. Although it was apparent that she didn't know what to do with Greer, she had switched back into a gentler mode. "Yes, I hope so," Greer said sadly. She looked at Alberta. "You believe me?"

"I think so." Alberta said, somewhat unhappily. "I hope you'll understand that I don't think well of your career choice."

Greer nodded. "At the moment, I'm not feeling too good about it, either."

"Good," Alberta said. She got up, dusted herself off, and stood there looking at Greer.

"Do you want to practice more?" Greer asked. She wasn't really ready for more practice, but she could do it if Alberta said so.

Alberta firmly told her, "This is enough for today. You really need to rest."

Alberta lapsed into silence as they walked back to the car, and stayed silent all the way back to Greer's apartments. Greer herself worried that Alberta might decide that the Watchers were a threat, and start eliminating them. If that happened, the more radical factions of the Watchers might take that as an excuse to start killing Immortals again, just as they had a year ago.

* * *

Greer walked out of the shower. Alberta apparently had given in, for she showed up the next day on Greer's doorstep. She seemed as defeated as she had the previous night, and she was certainly less talkative, as if a wall had come between them.

Greer listened as Alberta explained to her during the ride that although she couldn't do anything about Greer's past, she was still uncomfortable. However, Greer needed training, and Alberta said that she was obliged to give her that training.

The intensity of the training hadn't waned. Alberta still made Greer very tired. She suspected that it was because she had not had to train for anything in quite awhile.

Alberta had left her on her doorstep without a word, as if she wanted to get rid of her as soon as possible. However, Greer was somehow not surprised when she showed up the next morning. *Was that only four hours ago?* Greer thought.

Greer put some clean clothes on and went to the living room. Once there, she settled down and picked up a book. She felt sore, but contented. *I guess immortals can get sore,* she thought.

She settled down on the couch and the phone rang. She waddled over to the kitchen.

"Hello?" she said, attempting to make her voice as cheerful as possible.

"Hi, Greer," Michael responded.

"Oh, hi, Michael. What's up?"

"Just want to update you. Robert found Leland again, so you don't need to worry."

"Oh, good."

"You okay, Greer? You sound a little tired."

"I am tired."

"What happened?"

"I think Alberta is very actively looking for Leland. She's been all over the place the last few days. I've had a hard time keeping up with her. She's at her apartment, so I decided to take a break and a shower."

"Nothing serious, though?"

"Nope. Um, Michael?" she said, intending to tell him what had happened to her.

"Yes?"

"Um...I...well, I need to talk to you. Later."

"Anything wrong?"

"Oh, just a little matter," she said. *Just a little matter like the future of our relationship,* she thought.

"Well, I'll pass the message along to Robert. You still set for dinner?"

"Yes. Looking for an engagement ring?"

he'd stay in one place when he works, he travels more than I do. Wonder what the FSA's doing to keep him busy?"

"Probably more than you're doing, Michael Gardner!" she spluttered, trying to not double over and lose her balance. She grew serious for a moment. "I'll see you on Saturday, then."

"Yeah, just let me know when you're available."

"Now that can be highly variable, considering what we do." Greer told him. "I'll l talk to you later then."

"Bye."

"Bye."

Greer's laugh quickly subsided as she sat down on the couch. *Great, I'm subverting our archives. I wonder if future generations will forgive me?* she thought. She tried to get back to her book, but couldn't. She ended up going to her bedroom, where she managed a catnap.

* * *

It was a warm, sunny Saturday when Greer decided to take a walk in a local park. She wore the trenchcoat that Alberta had given her. Hidden under the trenchcoat was her sword, since Alberta told her to carry it as much as possible.

Alberta had gone off to hunt Leland, and she had told her pupil not to follow her. Greer, not anxious to run into Leland again, had agreed. Besides, she had seen Alberta's expression. *She doesn't trust me yet*, Greer thought sadly.

Greer stopped in a low valley. For a second, she didn't know why, but then she recognized the chill down her spine that meant that another immortal had come near her. She looked around, placing her hand on the hilt of her sword.

She swung around in time to see Leland coming down the low hill that she herself had come down. For a second, she wondered why he wasn't dead. Then she realized that Alberta hadn't caught up to him yet.

"Good afternoon," he said politely, as he came within ten feet of her. She took an involuntary step backwards. "I think we need to talk again."

"I don't need to talk to you," she said coldly. She still remembered his grabbing of her.

"Good grief, the woman's been infected by her," Leland said, waving his hands towards the heavens. "I'm not as bad as she paints me. I kill, yes. But so does she. And so will you. Do you find that wrong? Do you find me wrong?" he asked her. He then looked at her seriously. "She is bent on revenge, plain and simple. The worst thing I ever did to her was to kill her teacher, as part of the Game."

"But you did kill him."

"I killed him as part of the Game. I was challenged by him, and I won. That is the reality," he said as he drove his fist into his other palm to emphasize the point.

Greer shook her head.

"Now I have to play the card that I was given. I told her that you would be dead if she pursued her vengeance. Now I am forced to do so." Greer whipped out her sword. Leland smiled.

"I wasn't about to suggest that you stand there and let me lop off your head. Much as I enjoy Quickenings, I prefer to savour them after a fight. I like to keep up my skills," he said thoughtfully. "Too bad I never really got back into wars after Culloden in 1746. Who knows, I could have ended the American Revolution. Of course, I had some problems at the time. And these modern wars aren't much fun."

He took his sword out from under his jacket and held it at the ready. He bowed to her, and then swung. She was surprised by the bow, and almost brought her sword up too late.

She blocked the blow, and came back with her own attack to his side. He blocked it effortlessly. He then managed to connect with her left arm. The pain was ricocheting through her body, but she gritted her teeth to block it. She was not entirely successful.

Several times they circled each other. Leland definitely had the advantage, as he used manoeuvres that she had seen, but had never known how to counter. She knew that she was slowing down from the pain, but she would rather live with the pain than stop fighting and be dead. A wild thought occurred to her as Leland slashed at her. She managed to parry, and took aim at his sword arm. She didn't manage to hurt him much, but he was slightly distracted. While he was inactive, she whacked him in the head with the flat part of her blade. He reeled, and while he was off balance, she pushed him over. He lost control of his sword, and she kicked it away. He looked up, obviously in pain.

"Well, I haven't seen that kind of inventiveness in a long time." he said, grim but trying to laugh sarcastically. He tried to get his sword by reaching out, but she blocked him. He attempted to get up. She manoeuvred behind him and kicked him again as he grabbed his sword. The resulting reflex caused him to cut himself in the arm. He dropped the sword again and grabbed his arm. He looked up at Greer.

"Go on. I obviously have gotten rusty. And it will be my final piece of satisfaction, that she wasn't the one who finally defeated me." She had raised her sword for the killing blow, but stopped. *Why am I doing this?* she thought. *I don't want to kill him: that's Alberta's job!* He sighed, apparently irritated by her hesitation. "I ask this of you. As a last request. Otherwise, I will get up and make sure you are dead." As she trembled, he stuck his neck out. Greer, left without any choice, swung. His lifeless body fell down, and Greer felt like she was going to throw up her breakfast.

After a moment, she didn't have to worry about that. Leland's body glowed white, and wispy tendrils reached out to her, striking her. She felt as if something had exploded within her body. It was sizzlingly painful, and yet she felt more joyful, more powerful than ever. She felt as if knowledge and wisdom were using power tools to engrave themselves in her forever. She fell down, because she had lost all care for her balance. Even as she struck the ground, it was made warmly inviting and dizzyingly painful.

Then the sensation passed. She longed for the moment to go on forever, but it was gone. Her sword had fallen to the side, so she reached out and grabbed it. She used it to lever herself to her knees, for her recent experience had left her rather groggy. She looked up, and saw movement at the corner of her eye.

She turned over to a copse of trees, and was momentarily startled when she saw Robert. *Of course he'd be here*, she thought. *Why couldn't I remember that Leland was being observed?*

Robert had a stunned expression on his face, followed by one of fright. She held out a hand in a silent plea, but he stepped backwards and then streaked away from her, out of her sight. She suddenly found herself bawling. She sat there for quite a few minutes before collecting herself. She knew that she had a lot to do.

* * *

When Greer got back to her apartment, Alberta was waiting for her. She stared at Greer's bloodstained clothes. "Leland? He found you? Is he still alive?"

"He won't be troubling anyone any more," Greer said calmly. *Except for me, and my peace of mind*, she thought.

"I lost him. I kept looking for him, and I missed him. And he challenged you, to keep from fighting me," Alberta said wistfully. Greer nodded, and frowned. "What's the matter?" Alberta asked. "He told me that you were out for revenge."

"No, I wasn't." Alberta told her, then paused. She wrinkled her forehead in thought. "Well, I was sort of out for revenge. After all, he killed Silas. However, I hunted him for another reason. If him or someone like him wins the prize, I shudder to think of what will happen. The one who wins the prize will probably be very, very powerful."

"And that's why you were after him."

"Yes."

Greer sighed, looking at the lean woman with the tired and sunken face. Then she went to her bedroom, and pulled her large suitcase from the closet. Alberta followed her in, and watched her pull her clothes from the same closet.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm packing," Greer said abruptly. "I was foolish and forgot that there was a Watcher watching Leland. Now they will know that I am immortal. I have to get away before they can track me."

"Where will you go?" Alberta asked.

"I don't know," Greer answered. "Somewhere a long way from here." Greer added a few odds and ends, including a few books. Then she zipped up her suitcase and paused.

"I remember hearing rumours that one of us, the Watchers that is, started talking to an immortal. What was the fellow's name... oh, yes, Joseph Dawson. Maybe, after I've lost them for a while, I can go to him." Greer paused, trying to place the name. "I met him once. He runs an antique bookstore in Seattle. I drank coffee in his office one time last year, when I was tracking an immortal named Felicia Martins. Maybe I can see him again, and we can catch up when I feel safer."

Alberta came up and gave Greer a hug. "Do whatever you need to do. I'm glad I don't have the problems you have. However, don't forget that there is more to life than hunting and getting hunted. Enjoy yourself. I know that I will be finding some enjoyment," she said, smiling at some fond memory. "There's this fellow I want to see again. Haven't seen him since 1890."

Greer smiled briefly. She then bundled envelopes, stationery, and stamps into the suitcase. Greer answered Alberta's unspoken question. "I have to take care of something."

Greer picked up the suitcase, and took it towards the front door. She was going to open the door, but Alberta beat her to it. Greer smiled gratefully as she manoeuvred the suitcase out. After she locked her front door, Alberta walked to her car. She waved, with a sad smile, got into the car, and drove away. Greer watched her go. She smiled, and dumped her suitcase into the back of her station wagon. She drove away from the apartment building, and did not stop until she had reached the post office. Once there, she wrote a letter:

Dear Michael,

I'm sorry this has to end this way, but it does. No doubt by now, Robert has told you of the events in the park. I never meant to deceive you, but I had little choice. I am leaving our group. Obviously now I cannot remain. I would stay for dinner, but I have discovered that I cannot stand to be observed. Enclosed is the key to the apartment. You are welcome to keep anything you want, for I no longer care. Be assured that I love you, and would not do anything to harm you. I pray that someday we will be able to meet somewhere across the lines fate has decreed for us. Until then, we can only hope.

love,

Greer

She put the key in with the letter. She had already stamped and addressed the envelope. She put it in the mailbox, where she thought she heard it thump. After that, she drove away, not caring what direction she was going, only that she was going towards the future.

The Rules

I hate abiding by the rules.
This damn "game" has a lot.
No fighting upon holy ground,
And others I've forgot.
No taking stupid chances;
That's hard for me to do;
For I feel so invincible
I cannot die, it's true.
No telling them the secret.
No fighting in a crowd.
Our game is not for prying eyes,
Or talking of, out loud.
I asked Macleod once, why these rules?
Why do we have to try?
He grinned a bit and shook his head
"There is no knowing why.
There is no knowing when it ends,
Or who will be the last.
The Gathering is here, for sure,
The rest we can't forecast."
So day by day, I go to "school",
And try to deal with fears.
It's hard to live by rules and regs
For one, just nineteen years.

by Kathleen Y. Bergeron

TARA '94

Compar'd With Loss of Thee

by Jo Leahy

IT WAS RAINING. It was fitting, Duncan supposed. Raining on her parade. Except the parade was a cortege, and instead of standing beside him, making comments, she was silent.

Behind him stood Allan and Mark, jetlagged and pale, a pair of ravens in their dark suits. He could feel Richie and Connor, he didn't need to see them. Rachael had come up beside him, squeezing his hand, her blue eyes shining with tears.

"I've missed you," he admitted.

"Ah, what's twenty years? Thirty?" She smiled for his sake.

"Thank you for coming."

"We couldn't keep away." Connor clasped his kinsman's shoulder. He had only known her a short time, but had been very impressed with Tessa Noell. She had loved Duncan with all her heart, and he her. Connor had seen Duncan lose women before, and always it was the same. All he could do was offer himself, his life, his experience to help him over the pain.

* * *

A handful of people returned to the flat above the shop for coffee, determined to comfort each other. Everyone kept trying to talk to Duncan, and he just didn't seem to hear them. His eyes were empty. Connor recognised this and held back, a snifter of brandy in his hands, forgotten.

He had learned long ago that if you give your heart and soul, a lifetime later you must be prepared to take them back again. And there was no pain greater in life.

Yet Duncan had chosen it freely, and whether he had been wise or foolish in doing so, Connor was no man to judge.

He still thought of Heather when it rained in the Spring.

He drained the glass.

* * *

"And what about you, pet?" Rachael sat down next to Duncan on the couch, touching his arm to draw him back from whatever past he was reliving.

"What about me?"

"Ah, you will not escape me so easily. I have known you a very long time."

The other mourners had begun to file out in pairs and singly. The mayor had come, though she had only known Tessa superficially through her work. Richie had left to drive Angie home. Natalie Ward hadn't stopped crying since the funeral, and had disappeared hours earlier. Duncan couldn't blame her. All that were left were Allan with Mark, standing in a corner near the fireplace, talking quietly.

"A long time," Duncan echoed. "You'd think after four hundred years, a decade or two would be a blink of an eye, but it isn't. Not really. It is a long time."

He looked at her, and his eyes were no longer empty. They were sorrow.

"Thirteen years is a long time."

"Yes," Rachael smoothed a strand of dark hair back from his forehead in a consciously maternal gesture. "It is."

"What am I going to do?"

"Do you know I love you, Duncan MacLeod?"

"Really?" A ghost of a smile crossed his face.

"When I was seventeen years old, you appeared outside my boarding school in Switzerland. You were an apparition, to be more specific. The other girls talked about it for weeks afterwards."

"Spring, 1955. I remember."

"Oh, you were quite the dashing hero. Every time I looked at you, Connor frowned. I remember it well."

"You were his foster daughter."

"And you were his wild younger kinsman, with whom he had gone drinking and whoring for centuries, and he made me sure I knew all the tales. He was determined that I not fall in love with you."

"Was he?"

"It was all very paternal, and didn't do a bit of good, may I add."

Duncan leaned back, head against the couch, remembering. Connor had taken great pains to hide Rachael from the world. He hadn't even known Connor had a foster daughter, let alone one so lovely. And Rachael had been lovely, fair haired and blue eyed, and sweet as honey at the age of seventeen.

Not too different from Tess at that age.

"I can understand why she loved you so much." Rachael's eyes were sad, as was her smile. "She did, you know. You see, she must have, to have stayed with you."

"You stay with Connor."

"Yes, because I love him. He raised me, but it's more than that. I can't leave him." Her eyes strayed to Connor, who was standing in the kitchen, staring absently out the window. "He needs me, because it's too hard for him to open up his heart and love again. But you, you do it every time. And look at how much joy you shared in all those years. How much you would have missed if you didn't take the risk."

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

"In my own clumsy way, yes."

"What, get on with my life?"

There was a touch at his shoulder, and he looked up to see Alan standing over him.

"Mark and I are going to head over to the hotel."

"Thank you for coming."

"If you need anything, you know where to find us. You can call, anytime." Then he slipped out, his son a second shadow.

"What would I say if I did call?" Duncan wondered aloud.

"You would start with 'Remember how she tilted her head when she smiled?' and go on from there, I imagine."

"If Connor hadn't been your father, all those years ago..."

"You would never have broken my heart, Duncan MacLeod. No matter what Connor told me, I know that much. And your heart may break, but it mends. It always mends, because you have time."

"Not so much, now."

"You get what each of us get, immortal or no. You get a lifetime."

"But everywhere I look, she is there. Everything I touch brings back memories."

"Keep the memories, try a change of scenery. If it hurts to much to stay here, then *don't*. But promise me you won't give up. I've watched him," she gestured to Connor with a tilt of her head. "mourn a memory for decades now. Don't make me watch over you too. I can only take so much."

* * *

Duncan realised it was just family left. The closest thing he had to a family. He walked into the kitchen to get a brandy. He decided Tess would want him to have a brandy. She used to bring him one late at night, when they'd be talking after making love. Talking about everything, what they'd shared, what they were going to share.

Talking about forever and lying.

"Thinking about Heather?" Duncan looked Connor straight in the eye. He could tell when Connor was remembering better times. It was this terrible sadness that seemed almost like joy that creased his forehead and darkened his eyes.

"That peacock was right. I should have left her."

"You loved her," Duncan observed, and not for the first time. They'd had this conversation before, a long time ago.

"Sometimes I think I can't go on another day without her, and it's been four hundred years."

"If you had left her, it would be worse. Instead, you had thirty years. She died in your arms, in love with you. You were the last thing she saw."

"Yes. My face. My face that hadn't changed in all the years she knew me."

"Do you really think she cared? I know you, Connor. Ramirez was wrong."

"Maybe. You never listened to me."

"And look where it's got me."

"I'm sorry, old friend."

"The two of you, what a pair you are." Rachael put an arm around each of them. "Alike as brothers in some ways."

"So different in others." Connor raised his snifter in a toast.

* * *

"You take care," Duncan hugged Rachael, who sighed, her breath warm against his ear.

"I've had lots of practise. We'll be at the hotel til tomorrow, if you want to talk."

"Maybe."

"I know you will. If not now, then someday." She slipped out the door into the late afternoon sun to join Connor in the rented car, and the shop was finally empty. Duncan was alone. very, very alone.

* * *

Duncan stood in the centre of the shop, just letting the memories wash over him, drown him in their intensity. Tears prickled his eyes, but did not fall. He sat on the cement steps, one of her camisoles he had found in a pile of clean laundry clutched between his fingers, and he used it to brush away the tears that finally overwhelmed him.

Too many memories crammed into too small a space, he decided as he rocked back and forth, finally allowing himself to grieve as he hadn't since he first cradled her still warm body on the asphalt in the dark. His heart would break trying to catch all of them, he had to let some of them go.

* * *

FOREVER

He didn't know how long he sat there, unmoving, unthinking before he felt Richie outside. He must have been talking with Angie. Duncan hadn't been very good company.

He pulled on his trenchcoat, felt the keys a sharp and cold weight in his pocket, and he fumbled with them as he locked the door for the last time.

He faced the boy. Connor had warned him everything would change. He had known, even if Duncan hadn't, what Richie had the potential of becoming.

Had become.

Duncan swallowed, and looked him in the eye. Richie looked uncertain, and his eyes too were red from crying, even if he had only lost someone that had lately come into his life. It was something he was going to have to get used to, over the course of his lifetime.

"You're one of us now." He hadn't said it til now, and it felt like he was pronouncing sentence, but maybe that was because simply felt like he was being punished right now. He dropped the keys into Richie's hand, taking a deep breath. "Sell it."

He never thought the words could sound so good, and so wrong at the same time. But it was time. He smiled, somehow finding a smile inside him despite it all.

"Richie, watch your head."

And then they walked away.

And other strains of woe, which now seem woe,
Compar'd with loss of thee will not seem so.

- Shakespeare, Sonnet 90

Nothing Less

We met by chance upon a barge
In Paris, on the Seine.
The feelings springing up at once,
Were too strong to explain.

I knew I shouldn't fall in love,
For mortals' lives are brief.
I knew from long experience
It only led to grief.

But as the summer follows spring
And flowers, from seeds, start;
The feelings grew to fill my life
My body, soul, and heart.

For right about a dozen years
My Tess and I shared life.
We had far more good times as one,
Than ever, we had strife.

And when they took her life away,
Through a cruel twist of fate,
I nearly lost my sanity,
My heart was filled with hate.

My anger might well have consumed
And caused me to withdraw
I might have tossed aside respect
For every mortal law.

But Tessa's love was with me still
And through it I found strength.
I'll go on through my life, somehow,
No matter what its length.

In years to come, I know I'll smile
At memories of Tess.
I'll be the best that I can be;
For her, I can't be less.

by Kathleen Y. Bergeron

TARA 94

The Quick and the Dead

by Wendy L. Milner

ANA FELT A FAMILIAR tingling throughout her body that brought her instantly awake. Trying not to wake Robert who slept beside her, she slipped out of the bed, taking her sword from its holder beside the bed. She walked on bare feet in the direction where the feeling was strongest. Out of the bedroom and onto the deck, she faced the ocean, but she was also alone. The feeling was still there, but different. There was no other immortal nearby, perhaps there never had been. Too many times in the last few weeks she'd had this same feeling, as if the immortals were there, but just out of range. And always she ended up looking towards the east. It felt as if she was being pulled in that direction. She could feel the strength of the immortals gathering there.

At dawn Robert came out and joined her on the deck. She sat on the wooden seat with the sword across her lap. She was aware that he sat beside her, but it was secondary to what was happening around her. He said nothing, just sat with her for awhile before going back into the house and starting breakfast. Ana roused herself from her meditations when the smell of bacon drifted through the open window.

The small table was set with two different breakfasts; bacon, eggs, toast and hash browns for her; fresh fruit, and some sort of jellied leaves she could never figure out for him. She took her seat and waited for him to join her. He poured tea out of a hand painted porcelain pot into handleless cups. Together they drank the first cup.

"You've been doing that a lot lately," he said, looking out to the porch.

"I have to leave," she said. She supposed she could have said something on the order of she couldn't sleep at night, she was having dreams, or maybe come up with a reason for making a business trip. But they had been together too long for that.

"Is someone here?" *Someone* meant an immortal. He knew what she was. Years before an immortal had crossed through their lives, changing both their lives, but leaving them closer than before.

"No. They are gathering elsewhere. I have to join them." She seldom spoke in absolutes. For a question such as what she was planning to do that day, she would say *I was thinking about doing something*, or *I might go somewhere*. She always left the option open for anything that might come up.

"When do we leave?" Robert asked. In the back of his mind he was already packing, wondering how to get a sword or two through airport security.

"I have to do this alone," Ana said. "There is nothing you can do to help me now." She had never explained the gathering to him. Having to describe immortals had been hard enough. There seemed to

be no reason to tell him about an event which was too far in the distance to think about, which might not even come about till long after he was gone from the world. Only now she was sure the time had come.

"I won't be coming back," she said. She waited for him to say some thing, to question her, only he remained quiet, waiting for her to explain on her own. "There's a pretty good chance I'll die. And if I don't, then I'll be the only one left standing. And I don't know what will happen then."

"Don't go," he said, but his voice told her he knew that wasn't really an option.

"I have no choice. I feel like a bird facing migration. No matter which way I turn, I end up facing east. I must go, and soon."

"I'm coming too. Don't argue," he said quickly. "I may not be able to fight your battles for you, but at least I can fix you breakfast when you come home. Now eat before the rest of that cholesterol gels on the plate instead of in your arteries."

The swords were easy to get on the plane. Each one went into its own locked case which in turn went into an extra long duffle bag stuffed with clothes. The material of the duffle bag was a bit heavy and exceedingly strong although it looked like standard canvas. The lock looked old and rusted, but was the strongest steel available. The set had moved through many airports over the years with no loss of any kind.

First stop was L.A. Even as they got off the plane, Ana knew that they had a long way to go. Still, a nice meal on solid ground and a bed that laid flat would be a nice respite before they continued their journey. Before they left the airport, Ana took the duffle bag with her into the ladies room and retrieved her sword. She walked out with only Robert knowing what lay beneath her loose fitting clothes, and even he couldn't see it.

They rented a car over Robert's objection that it was just a waste of money if they were only going to be there a day. Ana didn't care about the money. She had enough for a thousand years or more, which was probably longer than she would live. Instead of money, she was more interested in comfort and having a car available at all times. After checking into a centrally located hotel, unpacking a few things, showering and changing, they picked a nearby restaurant and went out to eat.

The food didn't interest Ana. She sipped at the wine but didn't finish a single glass. Her nerves felt raw as if just below her reach she could sense an immortal in the area.

Ana felt the presence of the immortal as an increase in the irritation of the scraping of her nerves. She knew he was just outside, probably waiting in the alley for her. He wasn't as strong as some of the immortals she had come into contact with in the past. This one seemed very young some how, although she couldn't define exactly why she felt that way. She left the table with just a hand signal to Robert to wait for her. Already her mind was preparing for what she knew must follow. If this immortal had wanted to talk to her, he could have come through the front door. If he had no intentions towards her at all, he would have just passed on. Instead, he was waiting for her outside. That had only one meaning. They would fight and only one would come out of the alley alive.

There was enough light from the street reaching into the alley for Ana to see that the young immortal was not alone. There were three mortals with him, all young, all wearing the same colours. This didn't make any sense. No immortal fought with mortals. It was against all the rules. Even Robert waited for her away from the area of the fight. He might provide a barrier to other mortals who would try to interfere, but he would not interfere himself with her business. She wondered if this boy even knew what was going on. When he took a sword out from behind his back, she had to table her doubts. Whatever he knew or didn't was of no concern now.

"There are rules you aren't playing by boy," she said.

"There are no rules," he said as he slashed his sword around.

He no more knew how to fight with a sword, than he understood the rules. Ana still had no choice. First though, she wanted to be rid of the mortals. When the boy showed the sword, the others began to move in slowly around her. She watched them all, relaxing her muscles so that she could move in the direction of the first attack. The one coming from her left made a quick move. She pulled her own sword from under her coat, but rather than facing the one on her left, she swung the sword to her right for the one she couldn't see, but could feel would be coming. She sliced through most of his torso. For

a mortal it was enough of a blow to keep him out of the fight and probably take his life as well. There was swearing by the other boys. The two mortals backed off, but not far enough.

"This fight doesn't involve you," she said to them. "Be gone and you won't be hurt."

"They don't have to leave," the young immortal said. He advanced swinging his sword like a novice.

Ana heard steps behind her. The young immortal stopped his advance.

"Seems like there are a few too many people here," Robert said from behind Ana.

"Get rid of those two," she said, pointing her sword at the mortals. "They don't belong."

Robert advanced. The mortals realized their mistake and took off running. Robert went as far as the end of the alley. Ana put her attention back where it belonged. She wasn't going to loose her head through lack of attention.

The boy came forward swinging wildly. He thought to over power her by his sear size. Ana was used to such tactics. She side stepped easily and cut him as he went past. The boy went crazy then. Ana deflected the swings effortlessly. When he fell off balanced, a single stroke of her own sword finished the fight. She reached down and picked up the boy's sword. It was a cheap blade that could be bought at any pawn shop. It didn't even have a decent cutting edge.

The surge of energy brought her thoughts away from the inferior blade. It was as if she were standing in the eye of a hurricane waiting for the full force of the storm to hit, knowing it was coming and knowing that nothing could stop it. Pure energy rushed around her, striking out at anything that might ground it. The street lights burst in showers of sparks. Next came the swell of the quickening. Young or not, the force of his quickening knocked her against the wall. She gasp for breath as she was repeatedly hit with the energy that manifested itself visually as lightening.

In the distance she heard the popping and cracking of electricity running along any wire or rod. Her vision cleared enough to see the two bodies in front of her. Her hearing improved enough to hear the sirens coming towards her. No time to hide the bodies, she ran out of the alley. The rental car that stopped next to her was driven by Robert. She got in and collapsed on the seat. She felt as if she'd run a marathon or delivered a baby. The descriptions mothers gave of the pain of labour and the ecstasy of delivery came close to how she'd characterize receiving the quickening. Never having been on the other side, she couldn't say for sure that it was the same, but the description fit. Of course the vital difference was that instead of giving of herself to a new life, she was taking into herself a life that was over. A life that she had ended.

Long ago she had come to terms with the taking of life. She only fought when she had to, but she wouldn't turn away from it. Unlike the boy, she knew why she fought. She knew who she was, unlike the boy who was acting on impulses he didn't understand. The boy who had no training, who hadn't even understood that he had already died once. So what had driven him to pick up a sword and challenge her? She needed to find that out.

"We're going to Las Vegas," she said to Robert. Somehow, he had gotten her back to their room at the hotel. She didn't remember leaving the car or walking through the hotel. She relied on him too much. She hated to think what was going to happen when he got old and died. She was old enough to know better. She should have stopped herself fifteen years before when she'd first seen him. A moment of weakness on her part for a warm strong body left her now dependent on him for many things simply because it was nice to have him around. Then in only a few years, he would be gone and she would have to start living independently again. She had been through the cycle many times before and it never got easier.

"I'll make flight reservations," Robert said.

"It's only a couple hours by car. Let's drive." She stood up as if they were leaving immediately. Robert pushed her back into the chair.

"First we sleep. You're in no condition to drive and I'm still tired from the flight. We'll get there a lot faster if we wait until morning."

Although he made sense, Ana resented the wait. The death of the boy left her feeling hollow. He hadn't been ready for death. He hadn't even lived properly. While she could now trace his mortal death to less than a year before, he had no idea he had really died in a different alley in Las Vegas. She

wanted to know what had triggered him to pick up a sword. It was not an predisposition among immortals. Perceiving the presence of another immortal came without training. Trying to kill was learned. And no one had taught the boy anything. He had just had the impulse to buy a sword and start killing. There was no logic to it at all.

The drive was more than two hours. However, if they had taken a plane, they wouldn't have arrived any earlier what with having to get to the airport an hour or more before departure, checking baggage and swords, and then waiting for the inevitable delays that always occurred when you were in a hurry.

"Any place in particular you want to stay?" Robert asked as they came into the town. Her response that it didn't matter, startled him. It was the first thing she had said since the drive began. He was worried about her. He could see the change taking place in her hour by hour. No longer the carefree young woman he had fallen in love with fifteen years before, she had suddenly taken on a austere exterior that he suspected came not from a single killing, but rather from some event to come which only she knew about. While she had told him the gathering meant that only one immortal would survive, at the time she explained it, she had not appeared unduly distressed. She was more like a soldier heading into a battle where casualties would be high, but a battle which must be fought. He could understand that. He had fought his own battles both on a field of war and in the side alleys. He accepted her description of who and what the immortals were without a real understanding. How could any mortal understand what living hundreds of years would be like? What bothered him now was not knowing what was going through her mind. From the time they had landed in LA, something had started to concern her more than what she described as the gathering. The immortal boy she had killed wasn't the first sign of trouble, but the killing caused a significant shift in her behaviour. She was locking him out in a way she never had before.

Robert picked the motel based on its easy access to a few back streets and on the basis that they could get to their room unseen by others. On a vacation he might pick one of the nice hotels along the strip. On this trip, he wanted to be able to come and go with no one noticing whether or not they were carrying bloody swords. He had a feeling there would be a few headless bodies laying in alleys before they were ready to leave.

"Dress for dinner," Robert said. "I know this Japanese restaurant in town. And you will eat today."

"It's only noon," Ana complained.

"By the time you are ready, it will be late enough for an early dinner. Besides, in this town, no one goes by the clock."

Ana had to admit that she was hungry. She had hurried them through breakfast with little more than a few swallows of orange juice. She wanted them to be on their way. Once on the road, they hadn't stopped. She knew she had to keep eating even if it didn't appeal to her. Japanese food would be alright, she supposed. It would give her enough energy to run on without slowing her down.

She took her time in the shower. She felt gritty from the drive and just down right dirty from the killing of the boy. Scrubbing didn't help rid her of the polluted feeling, but at least the dust was gone. Since Robert had given her no time limit, meaning he wanted her to take more time than needed, she washed her hair and took her time drying and setting it. Although she tied her hair back so that in a fight it wouldn't be in the way, she did know of ways to make her hair look pleasing even pulled back. As she put her make-up on, she realized what Robert was doing for her in his unobtrusive manner. She had been so deeply into herself and her thoughts she had forgotten the world around her. She was being down right rude to Robert. There would never be a way to explain what was going on to him, even if she could explain it to herself. Still, that was no reason to loose touch with the mortal world. She had to live in both worlds.

There were no clothes in the wardrobe she had packed which would interfere with her fighting. She could hide her sword almost anywhere in her clothes, a trick that immortals learned but didn't seem to be able to teach others. When your life depends on a tool, you don't leave that tool behind. She sorted through the things she brought while Robert took his shower. By the time he was through, she was dressed in a dark blue satin dress that was cut conservatively, but was suggestive in all the right places. She could see from Robert's looks, that she had picked the right outfit for the afternoon and evening.

Very little needed to be said. They did a tour of a few of the casinos, commenting on trivial things before heading to the restaurant. Once there, they spent an extended period of time going through the ritual of eating. Ana felt as if she had come up from a long swim underwater. Fresh air, clear sky, clear headed again. They walked from the restaurant with arms around each other.

Robert felt the muscles under his hand shiver once then tense. The look on Ana's face told him she was once more the hunter in a jungle full of predators. She pulled away from him to free herself for action at the same time scanning the crowds around them. One of the faces would tell her who she was looking for. Her own ability to sense an immortal was highly tuned, more so than most and as such she was usually the first one to discern the presence of the other. At time that could be useful, particularly when she was trying to avoid a confrontation, but this night, she wanted to find the immortals who might live in the area. It was possible they could tell her something about what was going on.

Ana recognized the face even before he betrayed himself by stopping in the moving crowd and looking for her. While they had never met, Ana knew of him from others' memories. Jared was a distinctively unsavoury immortal. The last Ana had heard of him, he was doing business in the middle east, selling to both sides and any one else who had the cash to pay for his wares, and everything and anything were his wares so long as it made him a profit. Ana knew that he would not tell her anything unless he thought he could benefit from it. He didn't keep company with any immortal.

"Back off now," Ana said quietly. She felt Robert move away from her. She knew he would follow. She also knew that when he didn't want to be noticed, he could hide in open view. Jared would never know that Robert was around.

She waited until Jared finally took notice of her. He relaxed only a little as if he couldn't believe a woman would confront him. It might give her a second or two advantage. She thought she was going to need that. They walked towards each other slowly, ignoring the crowd, making their way to a middle ground.

"This is my territory," Jared said when they were within hearing range of each other.

"I didn't come here to fight you. I've got a mystery to solve and I think you could help."

"Go play detective somewhere else."

"No. This is where some of the answers are. I intend to find them before I leave."

"You'll not leave in one piece then."

"It doesn't have to be like that."

Robert watched from the door of a casino. Even from there he could see and almost feel the tension between them. They were like two cocks in the fighting ring checking each other out before the first move was made. Unconsciously the crowd was making a ring around them. The flow of people split and then merged back after passing them. This was not likely to be the place where they would fight. They didn't like mortals watching. He looked around and saw the entrance to an underground garage where their car was parked. No, still too many people there. Las Vegas was a town where tourists ruled day and night. No place was empty of them. Except perhaps the back stage entrance to the casino show. He looked into the shadows of the alley and realized someone was in there watching Ana and the other immortal. The guy carried a camera and took another picture. Robert walked causally down the alley, just past the man. Then he turned quickly and grabbed the camera.

"Not a good thing to do," Robert said. He opened the back of the camera before the man could react. Pulling the film out, he said. "You'd better leave now." Who ever the guy was, he hadn't been up to good, or he might have complained. Instead, he took off at a run without trying to retrieve his camera.

Ana and the other immortal began walking down the alley. The distance between them, the way they walked, the way they held their hands close to their sides, all told Robert there would be a fight shortly. He couldn't follow them immediately or the other might notice, and he thought he knew where they were headed. There might be time to get to the car and retrieve his own sword from its hiding place between the front bucket seats of the car. He didn't carry it with him because he had never learned that trick of hiding three feet of steel beneath a short jacket. But to get to the car, he'd have to let the two fighters out of his sight, something he didn't want to do. He had his own kind of premonition that he might have to ward off a few people. The guy with the camera bothered him. If Robert took the time to get to the

car, the guy might come back and interfere with the fight, or worse, call the police. Robert turned from garage and stealthily followed the two immortals. If he had to fight himself, he would have to rely on his skill with Karate and the short daito he did carry with him.

Ana felt the energy shift around her. It was almost as if there were a third immortal in the area. Almost, but not enough to make her look around. Jared did not seem to sense it as he took up a fighting stance. Ana drew her own sword. She couldn't shake the feeling that some immortal was watching and waiting. It distracted her enough that she missed Jared's first strike. He was fast and came close to slicing her. She parried and backed away.

The area they fought in was large. A semi-truck and trailer was parked at one end, backed up to the loading dock with its large doors closed. The ground sloped downward to the dock. Everything was covered in asphalt. The area was clear of trash and other obstacles. There were two entrances to the area; the alley they had come down and a back street now blocked by barricades. Buildings all around closed off the area. It was like a Roman arena.

Ana backed up towards the loading dock. Jared advanced, confident that the fight would be over shortly. He had never met a woman who could fight. A few had tried and failed. A few had even tried to seduce him and failed. He had no love for his own kind and even less for the weak women who diluted the strength of immortals. He would rid the world of one more this night.

Ana watched the way he moved. He walked towards her full facing, not expecting her to attack him, and leaving himself open. She didn't like being the attacker, but at times it was the only way to win. She took a chance and pretended to loose her balance. He tried to take advantage of her situation. Her attack almost caught him. She took a piece of his jacket from his arm with the sword. Close, but not enough to do any damage. He became a bit more wary of her.

A feint. A parry. Circle. Evade. They tested each other's defenses and watched for reactions and timing. Any advantage was utilized. Every opening became an opportunity. The swords hit each other. Sometimes slashing empty air as the defender evaded with a jump out of reach. Then defender became attacker with a counter strike. Back and forth they went. Lunge and retreat. A pattern started to form. Ana saw its formation first. Instantly she altered her moves and attacked at the same time he did. Her sword cut through more than cloth this time. She carved his chest from right shoulder to left floating rib. In the same motion, she reversed direction and came back and tore through his left arm. He tried impotently to counter. Ana whacked the sword from his hand. She took a strong stance and sliced one more time.

Jared stood headless for a moment before his body collapsed in on itself. Ana took a step back. This was no infant immortal she had just killed. He was an experienced fighter who had taken his share of heads. She could feel the energy gathering around her. The wind kicked up suddenly, collecting the sand and swirling it around her. The mini cyclone picked up speed and size clearing the area of any item smaller than the truck. Trash cans spun out of control. Dumpsters rolled down the alley. Lightening struck from the funnel cloud. Street lights exploded. Billboards erupted in a blaze of sparks as their light bulbs came to a flaming end. Junction boxes burst open sending an electrical blaze across power lines.

Ana was knocked to her knees. The power ripped through her body. She fought against loosing control of herself. Another bolt of lightening hit her, rocking her back on her heels. Her consciousness joined the quickening. Nothing existed but the power and energy ripping its way into her body. No longer was she an individual. Her essence melded with that of the immortals who had died before her. A flood of souls enveloped her. Thousands of years of experiences engulfed her being. She grasp for a thread of her own existence. A tendril of who she was. A name she could claim as her own. Ana. Forever Ana. This was hers. The others were transient names. Names from other times. Names from those she had known. Ana was hers. She was Ana.

The domination of the quickening weakened. She felt herself again. The emanations of lightening slowed and then ceased. She took a ragged breath, then another. With unfocused eyes, she looked at the devastation around her. Her automatic response was to try to get up and move away. Mortals would be coming to investigate. She had a bloody sword at her side. She reached for it and almost fell. The sword was much to heavy to carry right now. She took another deep breath and drew strength from it.

Robert brought himself out from under the over turned dumpster. He brushed off the dirt as he looked around. Even with his limited experience with these things, he would guess that what had just happened was more powerful than normal. As if you could call what happened to immortals or even immortality itself normal. Lights were out for an entire block around him. The day glow of Vegas was gone. People were confused, massing in the street, pouring from the insides of darkened casinos. None seemed to know the central location of the trouble. Which was good for him. He started to exit the alley into the loading the area.

Ana was almost in control of herself when once again she felt the presence of the other. No one was there. Only the pure energy of its being came in a rush at her. She fought a battle to repeal what she didn't understand. The strength of this other was greater than any she had fought before. She felt herself loosing herself.

A shadow crept from the protection of the truck. He held an axe in his hands. Now, while the blasphemous creature was still in the throws of the devil he would attack and rid the world of its obscene presences.

Robert was halfway to Ana when he saw the man creeping towards her. The same man who had been taking pictures now had murderous intent. Robert sprinted the distance between them. The man swung the axe at Robert, missing badly and receiving eight inches of steel in his middle in return. Robert twisted the blade and dissected the inner organs of the assassin. Then he went over to Ana.

Within her struggle she perceived a threat. Her sword came up, slashing at who ever was there. Mentally and physically she tried to protect herself.

"Ana!" Robert shouted at her. Her eyes were open but unseeing. He shouted her name again, not daring to come close to the blade in her hands. Slowly her eyes focused on him. The blade came to rest on her knees. "Ana," he said more gently. She looked up at him. "We have to go." He helped her to stand. She looked around her and saw the other man.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"I don't know. He was watching you earlier. He tried to use the axe on you." Robert stopped and knelt by the man. A quick look through his pockets showed no identification of any kind. He had a thought and took the axe from the man's dead hands, smeared blood from the corpse onto the blade, then he replaced the axe in the assassins hands. He saw a tattoo on the man's wrist. "Have you ever seen this before?" he asked.

Ana shook her head. But even as she did so, a memory tried to bubble up from deep inside her unconsciousness. Someone had seen it before. She should know it. Did it matter now? Robert took her by the hand and led her out of the alley. He wrapped his jacket around her sword, hiding it from the confused masses of people who milled in the street.

Emergency lightning was already on inside the garage. Robert got them to their car and put Ana in her seat. Once again she had a shell shocked glaze to her eyes. He got her back to their room at the motel.

Ana felt like a caged tiger. She wanted to leave, run really. There was something she had to do, only she didn't know what it was. She paced the small room, stared out the window, even headed for the door a couple of times. Robert would call her name and she would stop. She didn't know where she was going, only that she had to be there. Finally Robert took her by the hand like a small child, undressed her, gave her a bath and put her to bed. He worked the muscles in her back, trying to get them to relax enough to let her sleep. Very slowly he got a response from her. One knot let loose, then another. By the time her breathing had evened out, it was past four in the morning. He fell back on the bed exhausted himself.

"Darius," Ana said sitting up in the bed.

Robert pulled himself from sleep. Her word made no sense to him. "What?"

"Darius," she repeated. "We're going to Paris." She was already out of bed and starting to dress.

"Why Paris?" he asked as he willed himself awake.

"That's where Darius is," she sounded impatient.

"Don't you think you ought to call and see when we can catch a plane? It's not like we can drive there, you know?"

"You call. I'm going to pack."

Robert sat up. The clock said eight thirty. At least he had gotten a few hours sleep. He picked up the phone and punched the number for the airline. He'd done it enough that he didn't even have to look up their number any more. "I want to book a flight from Las Vegas to Paris," he said when the reservations operator came online.

Two hours later they were on the first leg of the journey. Ana seemed better, but was still lost in her own thoughts. During their long lay over in San Francisco, Robert got her to at least nibble on the sandwiches laid out in the first class lounge. She mostly stared out the window at the planes landing and taking off. Robert watched the news on the television. There was a short piece on the strange weather in Las Vegas that had caused a power outage for a few minutes. Some time during the storm, two men had fought and killed each other. Neither had been identified by the police as yet.

The overseas flight took off on schedule. Robert tried to get Ana to eat any one of the meals served during the flight, but she barely picked at the food. He managed to catch a few hours sleep. He suspected that she had just stared out the window the entire time. They landed and cleared customs without anyone asking what was in their over sized duffle bag. Once in the rental car, they took the swords from the bag. Robert took his knife and attached the sheath to his belt. His sword went between the seats. Ana managed to again hide her sword in clothing that should never have been able to hide its length.

Ana directed him along the streets. At times she was confused and complained that Paris had changed in the last fifty years since she had been there, still, she managed to get them to an old church which was her destination. She was eager to leave the car, but stopped half way across the street. Cars beeped at her. Robert took her by the elbow and propelled her along.

"He's not here," she said.

"You said it's been fifty years since you were here. He could have moved in that time."

"You don't understand. Darius has been in this church for a couple hundred years. He built it. He wouldn't leave it."

"Let's go inside and ask."

Ana was reluctant to enter the church. There was no feeling that an immortal was inside. Yet there was something there. That same something that had come for her in Las Vegas. Now she was strong and aware of herself. She knew she was in the right place, and it scared her like nothing she had ever felt before.

The stone church was quiet. Wooden chairs were set up for a service later in the day. Ana walked to the front row and sat down. She was sure now that Darius was gone. Gone from this church and possible gone from life as well. Darius had been one of the strong forces in her life. She had known him forever it seemed. Long enough, anyway, that it never occurred to her that he could die. No immortal would kill him. Besides, he never left the church grounds. Whatever reason had drawn him away must have been compelling.

Robert looked around the church and saw no one. He took a seat at the end of the aisle a few rows back from Ana. She looked
deflated. Only a few minutes before it was as if she were coming to the anticipated end of her trip. Now she was lost again.

Most of two hours was gone as a few people came, said their prayers and left again. Robert stood up and stretched. He wanted a hotel room, a bath and a real bed. His muscles ached from inactivity. He walked towards her to see if she was ready to leave yet. She seemed more in a trance than anything else. He turned back to his seat as a man came into the church.

How was this guy different from all the honest people who came to church to pray? Robert had to put it down to his eyes. He was a carnivore among the sheep. He was a hunter looking for prey, and Ana would be his prey. Robert took a couple of steps into the aisle and stopped. There was no reason this guy had to interrupt Ana right now. Besides, she had told him that holy ground was sacred to the

immortals, none would fight there. He might be overstepping his bounds by intercepting this immortal, but he felt he had to do it.

"This has nothing to do with you," the immortal said.

"Just leave her be," Robert said. "This is holy ground, you know?"

The immortal gave a bit of a smile that Robert found chilling. "I don't mean her any harm. I just want to talk with her."

"Later," Robert said. He stood in the path, blocking the way to Ana.

The immortal fished in his pocket, came out with a card wallet and handed Robert a card. "Ask her to come see me."

Robert took the card without looking at it and nodded. The immortal turned and left the church. Robert looked over at Ana who still held her quiet posture. Either she hadn't felt the presence of the immortal, or her faith in the unbreakable rule of holy ground was strong enough that she hadn't bothered to take notice of him.

Another hour past before Ana stirred. Robert went over to her and helped her to her feet. They started out of the church.

"Who was he?" she asked. Robert didn't bother to ask what she meant. He would have preferred that she not have another
confrontation so soon. Still, he handed the business card to her. She glanced it over and put it into her own pocket. She nodded to herself. "I need to talk to him," she said.

"Later. First we are going to find a hotel. You need to sleep."

"I'm fine."

"You can barely walk by yourself. You need to eat and to sleep. Then you can face this other one."

Ana wanted to argue but found he was right. Just the walk to the car made her tired. Since killing Jared, she had been up almost constantly. The driving force was quiet for the moment. She should take a little time for herself to recoup her energies before going on. "Alright," she said.

A small hotel close by the church. Ana pulled her French language from the recesses of her mind. They had a room on the second floor. Unpacking and showering took a little time. Robert could see a cafe from the room. They walked there for lunch. Ana felt better, but agreed with Robert that she would try to nap before meeting with the immortal. She surprised herself by actually sleeping for several hours. She woke hungry again. They visited the cafe a second time.

"I know you don't want me to go," Ana said. "But I have to."

"I'll drive then."

"You don't need to come. He could mean what he said, and just want to talk."

"Doesn't matter. I'd rather be with you than waiting around here."

"Alright."

They got directions to the address on the card. It was right on the river. Even with the directions, it took them awhile to find the place. Not a house or office by the river, but a barge on the river itself. Ana pointed it out as they drove by. She didn't see an address, but rather felt the presence of the immortal. They parked and walked up the gangway onto the barge. He opened the door as they approached and invited them in.

"I am Duncan MacLeod of the clan MacLeod," he said.

"I am Ana," Ana said.

For a moment they stood facing each other, sizing each other up. Ana had vague memories of him from others. A strong caring individual, a true friend or a fearsome enemy. He would not be one to take her head without cause, and she wasn't about to give him cause. She could feel the energy surrounding him. She wanted to be part of it. Suddenly she felt like a cat going into heat. She wanted to rub against him, to entice him, to bring him into herself. She wanted to yowl in some primitive form of communication. It had been years since she had made love to an immortal. That most basic form of connection was the closest one could come to taking a quickening without actually doing so. Instead the essence seemed to merge, making one immortal from two for a short time.

He must have felt it as well. His face was slightly flushed and he back up a step. "Something to drink?" he asked. "Brandy?"

"Yes," she said composing herself. She was here to talk. Besides she already had someone to share her bed. Robert might not understand what had just happened, but he looked very uncomfortable. They both followed MacLeod further into the room and took seats when he motioned them to do so.

Once seated with a drink in her hand, Ana went directly to the business at hand. "Where is Darius?" she asked. She thought she already had the answer, but she wanted confirmation.

The look that crossed MacLeod's face told her she was right. "He was killed about nine months ago."

It took a moment for the timing to sink in. Nine months was when the first urge to head east had come. "What made him leave holy ground?" she asked.

"He was killed on holy ground." The venom in his voice set the hairs on Robert's neck on end.

"Who?" Ana asked.

"It's been taken care of."

That would mean the person responsible was dead. Still she couldn't imagine any immortal killing on holy ground. "Who would dare do such a thing?"

"It was a mortal."

"Why? No mortal would even know how."

"They know. They call themselves the Watchers, but not all of them just watch. Some of them hunt us and even try to kill us."

The man with the axe came to mind. "Do they wear a tattoo, here?" she tapped her wrist. "A mortal came after me with an axe not too long ago."

"That would have been one of them. They have files on us going back centuries. They say their mission is to watch, to observe and not interfere, to record. Or so they say."

Ana took a long drink of the brandy. This was unexpected. In all her long years, she had never suspected that she was being watched. Oh, there were always the times when she had been in one place for too long. The neighbours or a noisy reporter would try to dig something up on her past. Still, it was nothing organized. She felt defiled. To have unknown mortals tracking her violated her privacy.

"What happened to Darius? Was anyone there for him?" She left unasked if any immortal had been close enough to receive his quickening.

"He was alone," MacLeod said bitterly. Everything he had been was lost.

Ana stood up and went to the small round window looking out on the river. She couldn't believe that Darius was gone. And in such a way. He had been a warrior long before he had been a priest. He should have gone out with a sword in his hand. He might have turned away from violence. He might have tried to bring peace into the world. But he was always the warrior. He should have died liked one.

"Nine months ago," she said, "half way around the world." She paused, what could she say. "I felt something call to me." She spaced her words carefully. "I was sure it was the gathering. Nothing was so compelling. I tried to put it off. I tried to tell myself it would go away. Instead it got stronger till I had no choice but to follow that pull. I've met two immortals since then. Neither felt what I felt." She looked back at him. MacLeod shook his head negatively. He had not felt it either. "I think now that it was Darius calling me. He died with no one to take his quickening. He is lost some where between worlds. He needs a resting place."

MacLeod shook his head. "He is dead. There is no more." His voice was flat with denial.

"No. Where do we go when we die? Mortals believe in heaven and hell. Some believe in nothing. But it is always belief never fact. We know we go on. We take a life and we receive their energy, their power, their quickening. We know that when we die we will merge with another immortal. That is fact. We may loose ourselves, our identity, but we do go on in the image of the one who has taken our quickening. We feel this with ever life we take. You have had your share, Duncan MacLeod, you know this to be true. So what happens when there is no one there to receive the quickening? Where is Darius now? His essence is still here, floating like a wraith in search of a body. His quickening is scouting for a place to be."

MacLeod shook his head again. "What ever Darius was, is gone. Nothing remains for you to find."

"Then what brought me here? Why, nine months ago, did I feel that I had to come? Why has that feeling increased to the point that I had no choice but come?"

"Why you? I was here when he died." He was angry now. "If he was going to call out to anyone, why not me?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because I knew him longest. I remember him as a gangly teenager already destined to be the great warrior, but right then worried more about getting his first new sword. I remember his first death and the change that came over him at the realization that he couldn't die as a mortal could. I remember his confusion when he returned from Paris after turning his army back. I saw the change in him that spanned centuries. I knew him and he knew me. Maybe he reached out for me because he knew I'd still be there for him."

MacLeod set his glass down on the table. He looked her over again, realizing how old she must be. Never had Darius talked of her. They had shared stories of the world, but he had not mentioned her name. Still, he believed her to be telling the truth. She had no reason to lie.

"Darius is still here. Not in any form we can recognize. We have to be there for him."

"How? What can we do?"

"I don't know. Wait and see what happens. Darius will tell us if we will only listen." She could see that he didn't believe her. "I am older than you, I think. Take what I say on faith. I am not completely crazy." He started to say some thing. She held her hand up. "Thank you for the brandy. We are staying at the hotel by the church."

Robert was already standing. He didn't understand half of what was said, and knew that a lot of things had gone by unsaid. They had a frame of reference of which he knew little. He was truly in an alien world when it came to things immortal. His love for Ana would keep him close regardless of his understanding.

"Now what?" he asked when they reached the car.

"Now we wait," she said. "Don't worry. We will have time to learn Paris again. It can be a nice city."

As long as she didn't go into a depression again he wouldn't worry.

Each morning before they went exploring the city, Ana spent an hour in the church. Robert stopped going with her after a few days. She would sit and appear to pray. On the second day, they met the priest who had taken over the church. The priest didn't live there, he had two churches he looked after. Darius' church was likely to be closed. It had too few parishioners to keep it open. The priest didn't understand how it had stayed open as long as it had. Since he had taken over, the cost of operating the church was far greater than what was taken in the offering. Ana knew where the extra money had come from. The charitable donations of many who knew Darius were always generous. Without Darius, there was no reason for them to keep the church open. It would be sad to see the church used for other purposes, but change was always happening around her. She couldn't stop progress just because she didn't like what was happening to the world.

They spent most of the day wandering around Paris, being tourists, visiting places Ana remembered, sampling food and beverages, or just walking hand in hand. Towards evening, they would find a new restaurant and spend a leisurely couple of hours over a dinner. Then Ana would return to the church. In the evening, they would find amusement at the theatre, disco, or again just walking along the river. Robert would have been happy except that he knew eventually things would change again.

MacLeod woke abruptly. His sword was in his hand before he was completely awake. An immortal was nearby, he thought. He pulled his pants on and went to investigate.

The barge was empty. No one was there. Had there ever been someone nearby? He didn't know. There was no one on the wharf. He went back inside and dressed properly. He didn't think he would be able to sleep again. It was nearly dawn anyway. Whatever had woken him was gone now. Still, he kept his sword within reach. He had an odd feeling that what ever it was would be back.

Ana went to the church earlier than usual, leaving Robert still in bed. The sun wasn't even up as she left the hotel. She walked towards the church, but didn't enter. The time was close, she thought. She walked into the garden and sat down on the stone bench, ignoring the cold. She closed her eyes, took

a deep breath and cleared her mind. The energy was there, building slowly around her. Soon, she thought.

He wasn't hungry, he couldn't settle enough to read, he certainly couldn't get back to sleep. MacLeod put on his coat and went out for a walk. He was half way to the church before he realized that was where he was headed. He shrugged and continued on. He couldn't believe that Darius was still around in any form. He believed there was some order to the universe even if he didn't know what that order was. There had to be a reason for everything. But not everything had to make sense. Darius' death had set events in motion that could not be stopped. The Watches and hunters were now known to many of the immortals. Many of those mortals were now dead. But so was Darius. He was gone forever.

Ana felt him coming when he was still blocks away. She waited for him to join her. "You felt it too," she said when he sat down beside her.

"I couldn't sleep," MacLeod said.

"And how many immortals would you say were here now? Two or three?"

He didn't answer. Ana was content to wait. MacLeod wasn't. He stood up and headed for the church. Ana joined him. The door to Darius' inner sanctum was locked.

"There is nothing here," he said, but even as he did, they both heard a woman's cry from behind the locked door.

It was a solid door, but the lock had been placed only recently and was inferior to the original structure. The lock split with the force of MacLeod's kick. They rushed through to find a young woman on the floor. Blood covered the rug on which she lay. Her hair was plastered to her face with sweat. Her breathing was laboured. Her swollen belly told the reason for her distress.

"I'll call an ambulance," MacLeod said.

"There's no time," Ana said.

The woman cried out again. She opened her eyes to see them and tried to crawl away.

"You take it easy," Ana said. "It will be alright." She knew what she said was a lie. The blood of the floor was not just the water discharge the came before birth. It was the thick blood that came directly from the mother.

The woman tried to talk, her words slurred and were not completely French. She was frightened. The church would save her. Her people did not believe her. They said the child came from the devil himself. They would kill the child. She stopped talking as another contraction racked her body. Her scream ended abruptly.

"She's not breathing," Ana said. MacLeod positioned her head and blew into her mouth. "Nothing," Ana said. She felt for a pulse and got nothing. MacLeod sat back on his heels. Ana felt a kick under her hand. "The baby is still alive." She ripped the rest of the dress off the woman. The belly rippled again. "She may be dead, but this kid isn't." As she held her hand on the belly, she could have sworn she felt an electrical charge. "We can possibly save the child. Give me your sword." MacLeod held back. "Now, damn it! In another minute they will both be dead." The sword came out slowly. Ana grabbed it and sliced once through the belly of the dead woman. It wasn't the first time she had delivered a baby of a woman already dead, but it was the first with such a tool. The sharp blade went through the tissue with no resistance. Ana went lightly with a second cut. Blood poured forth from the wound. Ana tossed the sword aside. She reached inside the woman and found the baby.

As she brought the baby into the light, the foundation of the church rocked. She pinched off the umbilical cord, picked up the sword once more and cut it. The woman was already dead. The child could receive nothing from her now. A ball of lightening exploded within the confines of the room. Ana held onto the child even as she was thrown across the floor. The child cried out. Ana felt a hand on her arm. MacLeod, sword in hand, was trying to help her up. She struggled to her feet. She let him guide her out of the disintegrating building.

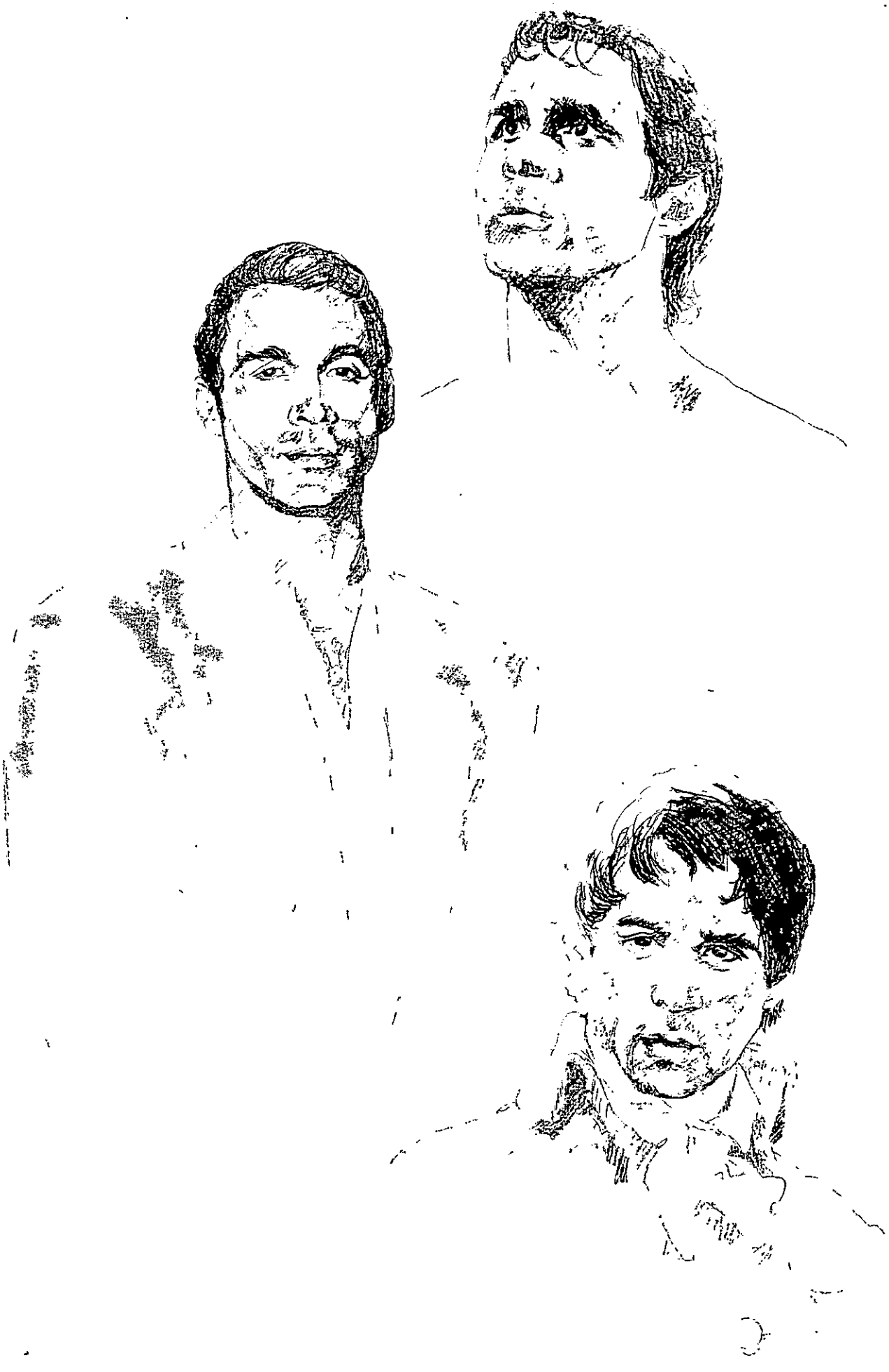
They were covered with dust. Ana took off her sweater and bundled the baby against the cold. Together they watched as the church finished its own destruction. Soon only a ruin of rubble stood where for hundreds of years Darius had held his court.

"We need to get that one to a hospital," MacLeod said.

"He'll be alright."

"Don't say it."

"Why not? Haven't you ever wondered where we come from? We are all orphans, are we not? At least this one won't be turned away from his home." She held the baby against her. "I'll take care of him."



Tara 194

Til Time and Times Are Done
by Tara O'Shea

I had a dream,
When I was young,
A dream of sweet illusion,
A glimpse of hope and unity,
And visions of one sweet union,
But a cold wind blows,
And a dark rain falls,
And now in my heart is shows,
Look what they've done to my dream.

- Queen, "One Vision"

Part I "A Cold Wind Blows"

NIAMH TOOK ONE LAST look around the front room and turned the little metal sign in the window from open to closed, flipping the deadbolts as she did so.

"Did you sell that end table?" She poked Kit in the ribs as he lowered the blinds.

"No, but that lady did pick up a carriage clock."

"Better than nothing," she shrugged. She was actually rather glad she had hired Kit to help her in the shop. It was a very pleasant arrangement. Christopher was a teaching assistant at the University, and really needed the money, and she now had someone to keep her company and look after the shop if she went on holiday or business trips of all kinds.

Her eyes strayed to matched dai-sho hanging in the case above her desk. She had gotten the longsword from the police auction, and the wakizashi she had retrieved from Himiko's home in Osaka. They were her only remembrances of her friend and teacher. The rest had been put in storage during the police investigation.

The sword was definitely not for sale, though she had had many, many offers since she had acquired it.

"I can't believe you got it." Kit whistled through his teeth, following her gaze. "Where did you get the money?"

"Oh, I have quite a bit tucked away." Only about eight hundred years worth in antiques, gold and cash. She laughed, then grew strangely silent, as something tickled her awareness. There was another of her kind near. "Well, it's getting late." She pointed Christopher in direction of the door. He picked

up his jacket and helmet and she forced herself to smile so he might not suspect what was wrong as she walked him to the back door. "See you tomorrow, Corrine."

"Bye, Kit." She watched him mount the motorcycle and turn out the end of the alley. She ran up the stairs to her apartment and retrieved her daito.

The buzz increased, and she saw a shape behind the blinds near the front door. She peeked through the blinds, sighed, and opened the door as far as the chain would allow.

Fitz looked delighted to see her, then saw the katana. "I hope that's not for me."

"No, Fitz. Regardless of the fact that you have succeeded in scaring me to death, I'll not take your head." Niamh sheathed the sword. "Either of them," she added, a twinkle in her eye, and he put his hand to his heart as if wounded. She stepped aside so he could enter, and then re-locked the door.

"Niamh ní Bhriain, you are ever so charming when you want to be," he observed, wryly.

"I go by Corrine Michaels at the moment. I haven't been Niamh O'Brien since..."

"Dublin, 1926."

"Fitz, I'm flattered you remember."

"A woman of such loveliness one never forgets."

"It was '29." She smiled sweetly. Fitz reminded her of one of Kit's favourite television characters. Her first thought when he tried to get her interested in Doctor Who was that that Baker fellow reminded her of Fitz minus the libido. "What brings you to Toronto?"

"I wish it were merely that I missed your company, dear girl, but I'm afraid it's something more depressing. Darius died a few weeks ago."

Niamh went ashen, then her face was flooded with colour, as they climbed the stairs to the back door of her flat. "I was just there a month ago," she said softly. "He and Himiko were the first of our kind I ever knew."

She sank into a chair, signing as she ran her fingers through her dark hair. "How? He was on holy ground—"

"It wasn't one of us."

"What?" She was visibly shaken, and could not find words for a moment, trying to comprehend what that meant. "It was a mortal?"

"Yes. A group of mortals who apparently hunt immortals. Duncan took it very badly."

"But his Quickening.... all that knowledge, all those centuries of experience and life..."

"I know, love." He put his hand on her shoulder as she blinked in confusion and then anger.

"All of it lost, it just isn't fair!"

"I know, love, I know. But what's done is done." He hugged her, and she wiped her sudden tears away with the back of her hand impatiently.

"He left something for you, that's why I came. I thought it better that you hear it from someone you know than over the phone or by letter." He removed a paper wrapped parcel from his bag, and she ran her fingers over the writing, her adopted name and Curiosities's address in the familiar hand. "He had this set aside for you."

She carefully undid the string and found a very ancient looking book, with a folded letter. She took a deep breath, and opened it.

Niamh,

It was a delight seeing you again, after so long. I will miss Himiko very much, and feel her loss keenly, especially after being reminded of what a great teacher she was, as you have proven her to be. When you described the dilemma of your friend Nicholas to me, I was reminded of this volume, which I am now entrusting to you, because I think it may do some good. I am sorry I could not produce it for you during your visit, but it took some time for me to hunt through my archives.

This book contains a section of cures for curses. Guard it well. It is my gift to you, poppet. Do come and visit again, someday soon. I told you I would hold you to that promise.

Darius

Niamh brushed away another tear, and smiled. "I wish I could, old friend." She looked up at Fitz, and smiled. "This book may be able to help a friend of mine." She removed a framed photograph of the ruins of a tower in Ireland from the wall.

"Ah. One of us?"

"No. Not quite." She opened a wall safe, and set the letter and book inside. "But someone extraordinary all the same." She picked up the cordless and dialled as she replaced the photo. "I'd like to speak with detective Knight, please." She said into the receiver, and Fitz quirked an eyebrow. "He's not in? No, no message." She hung up and dialled again.

"A police detective?" Fitz seemed bemused.

She nodded, then pressed the phone closer to her ear as a voice cheerfully answered "Natalie's Bed and Breakfast, our day begins when yours ends."

"Nat?" Niamh couldn't keep a chuckle out of her voice.

"No, this is her assistant, Grace. I've been hanging around here too long. Can I help you?"

"Is Dr. Lambert there?"

"I'm afraid she is out on a case, can I take a message?"

"No, I'll call back some other time." She hung up the phone, frowning. She tried Nick's loft, but got his machine. Sighing, she sank back into the couch.

"I really need a drink." She sighed, staring at the wall safe, then at Fitz. "And I don't feel like having one here. Are you up to a little socialising?"

"I'm not quite sure what you mean."

"Well, I don't know how well the tweed will go over, but I've been meaning to go to this club, and now seems like as good a time as any."

"Club? As in discotheque?" Fitz was quite bewildered now.

"Yeah, sort of. I need to change though."

* * *

The Raven was, as usual, packed with people. Niamh didn't know so much velvet clothing could exist in one place at one time.

Niamh was wearing a loose dress of black crepe which she had dug out of a trunk in the shop's basement. It smelled of lavender and a time long past, and she was actually fairly comfortable in it. Fitz noted that she had worn it in Dublin.

He didn't even want to know where she had stashed her katana.

"Funeral clothes." Niamh sighed as she watched the black-clad young people on the dance floor. She spotted a young woman sitting at the bar, a long, tapered cigarette holder in one hand, a glass of wine sitting untouched in front of her as she watched the patterns the blue smoke made in the changing lights at the edge of the dance floor.

Niamh recognised her by the choker. Nick said he hadn't seen her without one in two years.

Janette noticed them the moment they walked in. Their clothes, and the way they wore them, spoke of people who had lived in them, rather than children who had searched through vintage and trendy shops for them. The way they moved, the way their eyes moved as they scanned the crowd, their faces momentarily blank, told her that perhaps they were different.

"Janette?" the girl made the question a statement, and she nodded. "I'm Niamh. I'm in your debt."

"Ah, you're the one who bled all over Nicky's car!"

"What a wonderful way to be remembered." Niamh shook her head, cracking a smile. "This is Fitz." she cocked her head in the direction of her companion, who bowed gracefully, a gleam in his eyes as he took Janette's proffered hand and kissed it.

"Hugh Fitzcairn at your service, madame." He did not release her fingers, and Janette smiled at the peacock's charm.

"Fitz, give her hand back." Niamh sighed, realising just how much she had missed him. When he hesitated, Niamh leaned closer, a ghost of a smile on her face.

"She's bites, Fitz." She said in a stage whisper, and he dropped Janette's hand, still smiling. "Now be a good lad and go find yourself someone else to dazzle for the evening."

"I thought you wanted a drink?"

"I do. But I also need to talk to Janette, and it might bore you."

"My dear girl, how could two such jewels of your sex possibly bore me?'

"Girl stuff, Fitz." Niamh replied cheerfully. "I won't be long, now run along and play."

"You're friend is quite the charmer." Janette remarked, taking a long drag of her cigarette as she watched Fitz slip through the crowd after a slender blonde. "Perhaps I should warn him."

"Hmm?"

"To find someone else besides Alma—"

"Oh, I don't think it matters. It's not like she can kill him."

"Ah." Janette studied her openly. According to Nick, Niamh was older than he by little more than a century, and was of an entirely different kind than Lacroix and all his kin.

"Fitz came all the way from Paris to give me a book."

"That good a book?"

"I think it may be." She leaned over, and very softly explained the cures and how Darius thought they may hold the key to Nick's mortality. Janette listened with measured calmness, trying to decide if she should be pleased or upset.

"Have you told Nickolah?"

"That's just it, I can't find him. Or Nat, that's why I'm here. That, and the fact that I could use a stiff drink and some company."

"Surely your amorous friend..."

"My amorous friend simply reminds me too much of someone else right now." Niamh's tone was light, but the depth of her pain shone in her pale eyes, and Janette knew that look well. Nickolah got it often. It meant some crushing defeat. He always got his hopes up too high, and she guessed it was much the same for this nine hundred year old woman before her. She motioned for the bartender, who refilled her glass and handed Niamh a rum and coke when she asked for one. They carried their drinks to a table in a remote corner of the club, away from prying eyes and ears.

As they sat down, Niamh took a long sip of her drink, her throat suddenly tight.

Niamh plucked the wedge of orange slice from the rim of her glass and stared at it with a sad smile on her face. "I remember when I would have killed for an orange."

Janette just watched her with large blue eyes, unblinking, impassive. But she carried her own memories.

"I remember how our gums used to bleed, and the children's bellies in winter would swell from hunger, and we buried half that were born, some years. Winter now means hot chocolate and snowmen, and Father Christmas on every corner." She sighed. "Times change, so fast sometimes it seems. People don't...."

"Don't they?" Janette purred, sipping her wine and blood. "I think perhaps they are not as blind as they were."

"How so?"

"Now, everyone questions. They question everything. Religion, politics, life. No one blindly follows anything as they once did."

"I wonder about that." Niamh laughed. "Look at these children, slaves to fashion as ever man was."

"Perhaps." Janette allowed herself to smile. "Now we have, oh what is it called.... Grunge, is it? Children who even when they want not to look fashionable are fashionable."

"They all dress alike now. Remember when fashion meant something? When dressing was a ritual that denoted class, household, clan and status?"

"When dressing took hours, and required the help of at least three servants?" Janette laughed. "I hated those days!"

"Why?"

"Because I never had the servants, and Nickolah was ever eager to *unlace* something, but lace up? He and Lacroix were as useless as newborn babes." They both collapsed into helpless giggles.

"Men." Niamh snorted, noticing Fitz seemed to be holding his own with Alma. "I only ever knew one good one."

"Really? Only one?"

"Darius." Niamh swallowed the rum and coke, tears stinging her eyes. "Ah, he was the best."

"Lover?"

"No." Niamh choked on a laugh. "No, Darius was a priest by the time I got to him. I can still remember what the day was like. Paris in January. Miserable. Grey, damp, chill. Perfectly dreadful. Himiko was bundled up to her ears in furs, and me in my woolens. God, I haven't thought of this in years. It was right after the Normans had torn up England, conquering they said, like the Northmen they really were. Pirates the lot of them. Crossing the channel was hell, even with Himiko's perfect French we never slept a wink with all the sailors up to their mischief. They'd never seen anyone like her, and there I was, this grubby little Celt. Well, not grubby. Not any longer.

"Anyway, we finally got to Paris. All the students were drunk, and partying in the streets and we stole along in the dark to this stone church at the gates of Paris. It's much larger now, grand, a cathedral. In any case, back then the roof leaked in the monks quarters, and it was cold and damp, but it had a marvellous library.

"I don't know how Himiko managed it, her being an infidel as far as any and all were concerned, but next thing I knew we were in the chapel. I had no idea what I was in for, Himiko had been strangely silent the whole trip. I had never known any immortal besides her, and was terrified when I sensed him. So old. So much raw power in one being, he must have been two thousand years old even then, and I fumbled for my sword until he turned around, and he had the face of an angel.

"His eyes were pale green, like the sea on a crisp fall day, and he just smiled. I felt like I had known him all my life in that one second. Darius had that effect on people. Ah, but he was a sweet one. Sly sense of humour, you never knew it till it was upon you." She laughed. "He and Himiko used to brew these teas. The two of them were like mad scientists, with their molds and fungus."

"Sounds perfectly dreadful."

"Oh, I assure you they were."

"What happened to this friend? Did he die in— what do you call it?"

"The Game? No, Darius was on holy ground when he died. He hadn't taken part in the Game in over a thousand years. Darius was a pacifist. He was once the greatest General in all the world, and yet he spared Paris, and become a priest. He rarely left the church, maybe venturing out once every hundred years or so to do some good deed. None of us would have dared kill him, except perhaps Greyson, and he's dead now." She sighed, draining her glass, feeling the liquor warm the emptiness in the pit of her stomach, making her just a bit fuzzy. She welcomed the effects of the drink, blurring the hard edges, blunting the pain just a bit, making it more bearable.

Janette was silent, thinking back to a time in Paris, not much later than the winter Niamh had described, when Lacroix had insisted on entering a church. She had not followed, been unable to follow, and the fledgling Nicholas could not have withstood the fire in the holy symbols, so she had waited with him out in the snow while Lacroix disappeared into the building for hours.

She never knew what had happened. She wondered now. What would two ancient beings might have said to one another, if they had ever known one another at all. What two beings so opposite might have shared just by the virtue of their nature, both having lived so long.

Not unlike herself and this Niamh, this girl who was a little like a mirror of herself. Alike, yet exactly the opposite, an image flipped by the glass. Had the two of them sat down to tea, or had they raged at one another? Had Lacroix played the gentleman or the truant child with this Darius, this amazing priest?

She would never know.

"Have you ever lost someone?" Niamh tried to make the question sound purely academic, but the ice in her glass shifted as her hand shook.

"I think I have lost and found Nickolah more times than I can count." Janette smiled sadly.

"If he does become mortal again, as he longs to, would you let him go?"

"You ask hard questions."

"Hey, I bared my soul. Now it's your turn."

"Some might say my kind have no souls."

"Bullshit." Niamh leaned back in her chair, cradling the empty glass in her chilled hands. "Every living thing has a soul. I can feel it in the land, the animals, and men. I can feel it in you."

"Can you?" Janette was amused.

"I can feel it strongest in mine own kind, but yes, I can sense life in all it's forms. It's like background noise. Like the vibrations of the music that hum under my feet and hands. If you didn't have a soul, there were be a void when I look at you. But there isn't. I can't explain."

Janette laughed. She didn't believe a word of it. "How did your friend the priest die?"

"Mortals." Niamh said, shaking her head. "There is a group, almost like a religious order who watch us. Fitz knows more about it that I, he actually was caught by one of them. He said that only the renegades hunt, that they are founded merely to watch and record."

"And you don't believe that?"

"I don't know what to believe."

"Tell me more about this volume that has come into your hands from your ancient priest."

"From what I can tell it's written in an old Indian dialect, some form of Sanskrit. Darius made some notes in French and German among the pages, those I could understand. I just scanned it before I put it away in the safe."

"Are you sure it's safe there?"

"Janette, you, Fitz and myself are the only people on the planet who are aware a copy of the abarat even exists."

"In this place, the walls have ears. I would not bring the Enforcers down on your head."

"The Enforcers?"

"I see Nick did not tell you everything. The Enforcers enforce the code, and if we are threatened with exposure to the mortal world, they will do anything to ensure that does not come to pass. If tangible proof exists, a photograph, a book, a computer disk, anything concrete, the mortal cannot be hypnotised. Therefore..."

"Therefore they must die."

"Yes."

"What about Nat?"

"No one knows, and of the few who do, none would turn her in. They fear Nick and myself more than they do the Enforcers."

"I see. My kind have no such code."

"But you do have rules, as we do."

"Yes. But some of them are conventions only, adopted so long ago we don't know if they are physical, or merely etiquette."

"What do you mean?"

"The Quickening is something none of us really understand. In all of my memory, I have never heard what would happen if we fought on Holy Ground. Some say we can't hurt each other, that there is something physically barring it. Others say there will be no Quickening if there is a kill on Holy Ground. Still others say that Quickening gotten on Holy Ground would destroy the recipient."

"Ah."

"Indeed. And I am not one to break a law to test a theory. Not if it could mean my life, or worse." The bartender brought Niamh another rum and coke, half of which she drained in one long sip. Janette raised a brow, but said nothing. "Darius's Quickening was lost. There was no one to receive it when that bastard took his head."

"Which do you mourn more, the loss of the knowledge, or the loss of the man?"

"Both. They are all tied up together for me. If someone had been there, gotten his Quickening, then a part of him would live on. But..."

"But now he is well and truly gone. Just like a mortal."

"Yes. He deserved so much more... Darius should have lived forever. If any of us deserved it, it should have been *him*."

"Your friend, Fitz. Would you kill him, if it came down to it?"

"I don't know. I have few friends left. I don't like to think about it, what would happen if we were the only ones left. I hate it!" She hissed, tears blurring her eyes. Janette touched her hand, lost in thought. "I hate all the death. I'm getting so tired of it, all of it. But what can I do?" She laughed hollowly. "It's not like I can kill myself."

* * *

Christopher looked up at the sound of a key in the lock.

Or rather, someone attempting to insert a key into the lock without much success.

He peaked through the window, smiled, and pulled the door open. Niamh almost fell inside, and Fitz was hanging on her, babbling in a language Kit did not recognise, which Niamh seemed to be ignoring.

"Corrine?"

"Yes?"

"Are you shitfaced?"

"You bet, bhoyo. Have you met Fitz?" He shook his head. "This is Kit."

"Sut rydμch chi, heddiw?"

"eh?" Kit looked bewildered and Niamh shrugged, pushing Fitz in the direction of the stairs, and he ambled up to the loft, still muttering to himself in Welsh. "That was Fitz."

"Corrie, it's 9am."

"I know. I'm actually not as drunk as I seem to be."

"Yeah, *right*."

"Yeah. I think I'm going to crash for a while." She seemed so cheerful, Christopher knew she was going to have an amazing hangover by evening. "You're in charge."

"Great."

"Don't sell anything too important while I'm asleep."

"I'm sure I won't."

* * *

Niamh awoke fully clothed under her down quilt, the LED display of her alarm declaring it 3pm altogether too brightly, and she was pleased to note that Fitz was also fully clothed. This was important to note only because he was in the bed with her.

She would have been pissed off if it weren't for the simple reason that they had both been too amazingly drunk to do anything they might regret later.

Not that she hadn't done such things in the past.

But now was *not* a good time.

She ambled down the stairs, blinking in the afternoon sunlight that flooded the room. Kit suppressed a chuckle at the expression on her face as she shielded her eyes are drew the blinds.

"Hey, Corrine, there was a message on the tape when I opened this morning, something from a friend in the States."

"You catch a name?"

"Mitch in Seattle ring any bells?"

"Got it." She snared the portable and dialled from memory. Mitch picked up on the first ring. "Mitch? It's Corrie, I just got your message."

"Where were you last night? I called and called..."

"I was out. With an old friend. So what's up?"

"Look, I was going through the paper yesterday morning and thought you might like to know your artist friend, Tessa Nöell, died the other day. The funeral was Saturday, and the shop is up for sale... Corrie?"

"I'm here."

"MacLeod has some guy named Ryan selling the whole thing, stock and all. I figure you'd want to know before it gets out on the grapevine and every antique dealer in the northern hemisphere converge on the place like piranha."

"Look, do you have Nash's number in New York?"

"No, but I have Rachael's home number. Why?"

"Nothing... I just thought he should know."

"How do you know Nash? He's a weird bugger."

"Old friend."

"*Jesus*, Michaels, is there some sort of conspiracy among antique dealers around the world? What is with all this old friend stuff?"

"Mitch, I'd love to talk, but I need to think. How did Tessa die?"

"Carjacker with a gun."

"Jesus God...." She blinked, not believing. Not able to believe it.

"Yeah, the things that happen nowadays... remember when it was just 'lock your doors'? Now it's 'own a gun.'"

"I gotta go, Mitch." Her voice was devoid of feeling.

"You take care of you." Mitch sounded concerned, and Niamh smiled sadly. If he only knew.

"Yeah. Bye." She hung up the phone quietly, then suddenly threw it across the room.

"Corrine!" Kit froze in the act of opening a display case.

"Dammit dammit *dammit*!" He came over, placing one hand on her shoulder, and felt a shudder pass through her tiny frame. "Tessa's dead." She gave half a laugh that ended in a sigh. "I don't know why I should be surprised."

"Hey, I'm sorry." Kit hugged her, knowing that somehow there was more to what he was witnessing than the death of a new friend. Much more. But then, there were things about Corrine Michaels that he didn't think he'd ever be able to figure out.

"I've got calls to make. Duncan and Richie are selling the store, I have all kinds of things I have to do. When Fitz comes down, tell him I'm in the office."

I'm not seventeen, but I've cuts on my knees
falling down as the winter takes one more cherry tree

— Tori Amos, "Girl"

Part II "Falling Down"

NIAMH HUNG UP, somehow feeling calmer after speaking with Rachael in New York. She liked Rachael. The grand English lady who looked after Connor was much more accessible than her employer for some reason, despite the fact that MacLeod was one of her own.

Connor MacLeod rarely let people get close to him. That much Niamh had picked up when she had first met him, years ago. It had been at an auction in Vermont, where they attempted to outbid one another for a Muramasa dai-sho. There they were, Corrine Michaels and Russell Nash, rival antique dealers for all those assembled there knew. Mitch had been there, and that was when he started wondering what it was with certain dealers. He made an observation then. Upon meeting, one of three things were bound to happen, he remarked to her that very afternoon. Either they were "old friends", or they alternately loved or hated one another on sight.

Niamh had laughed it off. She wasn't laughing later, when they had confronted one another in the freezing cold out in the parking lot.

"I am Connor MacLeod, of the clan MacLeod."

"I am Niamh Ni Bhriain, of the Brianagh."

And then they had whipped out near-identical Masamune katanas.

That was how she had discovered how much they actually had in common. Ramirez had been their link, albeit indirectly. They had chatted for a few hours, gotten pissed in the hotel bar, and then the next day they had parted.

She hadn't seen him since. She had no idea there was more than one MacLeod until she had met Rachael.

Rachael was Connor's conscience, his memory, his heart. She was like a daughter to him. She loved him dearly, perhaps better than any mortal had in hundreds of years. Connor had raised her, but in turn she had taught him to open his heart again in a way he hadn't apparently since the death of his first wife.

It had been a year or two after Nash had snared the dai-sho. She had been in New York, and on a passing whim had looked up the shop and dropped by. The store had been empty save for a slim blonde woman, perhaps 30, perhaps 35, with a crisp English accent and guileless blue eyes. Niamh had admired the matched dai-sho, which then had hung in the main room. They had chatted, Niamh meaning only to leave a message for Mr. Nash, but finding Rachael to be a delightful woman. It had not taken long for the two of them to realise all the pretence was pointless. Rachael knew exactly what Niamh was, and Niamh knew she would never have to be anyone else when she talked to her.

Thinking about Rachael now, Niamh was reminded of Kit. They had the same eyes.

Niamh couldn't help wondering what it would be like when Rachael finally aged and died.

Or if Rachael outlived her and Connor both.

It was not a thought she wanted to follow at the moment.

* * *

The sun slipped behind the horizon, and Nick's eyes snapped open. He padded into the kitchen and spotted the note he'd tacked to the fridge that morning. He glared at the tupperware container of protein drink standing alone among the two remaining bottles of cow blood, but picked it up anyway. Nat would kill him if it wasn't empty by the time she brought the next batch. He poured a small serving, and

grabbed the portable phone. He had gotten home with minutes to spare and couldn't keep awake long enough to call Curiosities during work hours, and Niamh's private line had been busy.

* * *

Fitz had started out looking a bit green, and after hearing the news about Tessa, was now pale.

"I have no idea where Duncan is," Niamh sighed, running her fingers through her hair. "He's disappeared, or at least I can't find a listed number."

"I don't think he'd ever worried about surviving her, not with the Gathering here at hand." Fitz sank into one of the chairs, steepling his fingers. "It must be terrible for him and the boy."

"Richie." Niamh supplied, lost in thought. The phone rang, and she snatched it out of its cradle a bit too hastily. "Curiosities, can I help you?"

"Niamh?"

"Nick!"

"I got your message, and tried to call this morning..."

"I'm sorry, I got in late and must have kicked the phone upstairs over on my way to sleep. I was not myself. Should I drag out my cook books yet, or are you still on a liquid diet?" She forced cheerfulness, and was relieved that it was not as hard as she thought it would be.

"I'm afraid it may be a while before I can sample your culinary talents."

"It may not be so far off as you think."

"No?"

"I got a visitor and a package from Paris. Fitz found a book set aside for me among Darius's things, something he wanted me to have it would seem. I can't read it yet, it's in a language that predates me, I'm afraid, but I remember you telling me something of a book you were looking for in Germany?"

"The Abarat?" Nick sounded guarded, and she couldn't blame him. he had been looking for a copy for so long she was sure he had given up hope by now.

"Darius had an extensive library, one that would rival any museum, I'm sure. His letter was short on the details, certain he would be able to explain them to me in person but..... time caught both of us up, I'm afraid." Her voice caught, and Nick's voice was filled with concern.

"How did it happen?"

"Fitz said it had something to do with a mortal group, called the Watchers. *Everyone* is rather short on the details it would seem. In any case, before I even think about a museum or anything else, I want to get the thing translated. We wouldn't want anything potentially dangerous to either of our kind falling into the wrong hands."

"Niamh, be careful. There is something I haven't told you, about some of my kind called the Enforcers—"

"Oh, I know all about them. I've had quite a little chat with Janette."

"Oh."

"Yes, we talked at length, about many things."

"Oh."

"Listen, can you be over here, or are you on duty?"

"My shift ends at four, do you think you can hold on till then?"

"I'm not going anyplace." She smiled, toying with a lock of her hair. "I'll be expecting you."

"Well?" Fitz perched on the edge of the desk.

"We've got ten hours to kill, more or less." She removed the photo and opened the safe. "Let's see how much of this bastard we can get translated. You know Sanskrit?"

"A smattering."

"Great, that's a smattering more than I." She settled down, gingerly opening the decrepit manuscript. "I can manage the French and the German, however."

"The French and German what?" Kit stuck his head in the office. "I sold the end table, by the by. That lady came back with her husband."

"Just a book that Fitz brought from Paris."

"How old?" Kit's archaeologist's instincts had kicked in, she could see it in his hazel eyes.

"Very, very old. I don't suppose you know any sanskrit?"

"Quite a bit, actually." Niamh's jaw dropped, and he grinned. "Hey, there are some things I do better than you, you know."

"Remind me never to doubt you." She scooted her chair over, making room for another at the desk, and they got to work.

* * *

As a light rain began to fall on Yonge street no one seemed to take notice of a tall man in a large overcoat standing in the centre of the walk, staring up at the lighted windows above a closed antique store.

And no-one saw him smile. Had they, it would have chilled them to the very bone.

* * *

There was a tap at the window, and Niamh almost jumped out of her skin.

"Nick!" She whispered fiercely, lifting the sash. "Kit's here, what if he'd seen you? Doors were invented for a reason."

"Kit's here at 4am?"

"Get that lecherous grin off your face, we've been working on translating that damned book for hours."

"Nice pun."

"What pun? I'm quite serious."

"Any progress."

"Only if you are suffering from warts, blighted crops, and sleepy sickness."

"Oh."

"Don't look so glum, we've got four chapters still to cover."

* * *

After forty-five minutes of checking their translations, Nick felt rather than saw the glow that was beginning to spread in the East.

"Look, Sunday is my night off, so how about we relocate to my place and you and Nat can do some cooking, and I can be there in case the Murphy case cracks."

"Stonetree working you ragged, eh?" Niamh grinned, her voice a whisper as Fit and Kit napped in the living room, each on opposite couches. Fitz had traded one tweed jacket for another, and the smell of his silly pipe still lingered, making Nick look rather green.

"Well, everyone has to make a living." Nick matched her smile, feeling better than he thought he would about the entire affair. He had refused to get his hopes up, but things seemed to be getting better and better all the time.

"Give Nat my love." She hugged him, quickly. "I best tuck the boys in. Big day tomorrow. Inventory."

* * *

"Corrie, what is this?" Kit held up a pottery bowl, frowning.

"It's either a seventh century thrown vessel, or one of the onion soup bowls that disappeared from my kitchen last month."

"Ah."

"I wondered where that went." Niamh smiled, and put the bowl aside to wash out upstairs. Fitz had taken off that morning to see the sights, whatever that meant.

"How long have you had the shop?"

"About eleven years," she replied without thinking.

"Did your family own it, or did you start working here instead of babysitting?" Kit laughed, trying to picture her as a busy thirteen year old, arms full of manifests and silver polish.

"My mother... my mother owned it before I did. She left it to me in her will."

"When did she die?"

"A long time ago. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. You just seem awfully young to be an antique dealer."

"What, you think they should all be grey old men with glasses on their noses and sweaters with elbow patches?"

"Something like that."

"It's a good thing you never met MacLeod. He looks like an antique dealer about as much as I do."

"What does Fitz do?"

"As little as possible," she laughed. "He's old money. Very, very old money." The phone rang, and Niamh snagged it, shifting the ledger to her other arm. "Curiosities, can I help you?"

"Niamh?" a woman's voice with a midwestern American accent.

"Who's this?"

"It's Alma, from the Raven. I need to talk to you, about the Abarat." The word was a whisper, but it carried. Niamh's eyes widened, then narrowed. *Curiouser and curiouser.*

"Where?"

"Not here, it's too risky." Niamh wanted to ask why, but held her tongue, as the young vampire sounded exceedingly nervous. "Can you meet me at St. Aquinas on Hoskin Ave. at sunset?"

"Deal. See you there." Niamh hung up, and glanced at her watch. "Kit, can you take over? I have some errands to run."

"Sure. When will you be back?"

"I won't be long." She shrugged. "I don't think."

"What about Fitz?"

"Fitz can take care of himself. If I'm not back by eight, lock up early and head home."

"Gotcha, boss."

* * *

Alma hung up the phone, shivering. Gloved hands encircled her throat, and she closed her eyes, terrified.

"Excellent, my dear."

"Janette is gonna *kill* me."

"Janette will never know, will she?"

"No," Alma whispered, and then he was gone.

* * *

Kit snatched the receiver out of the cradle on the third ring. "Curiosities, Christopher speaking, can I help you?"

"Hi, this is Nick Knight. Is Ni— Corrine there?"

"She's gone out. Can I take a message?"

"Out, eh? Did she say where? Is Fitz with her?"

"I'm not sure." Kit shrugged, though there was no one there to see him. Old habit. He used his hands and body to talk for him, even on the phone. "She got a phone call, and then said she had some errands to run. She should be back by eight, or so."

"I'll ring back, then."

"Sure thing. And if I see her I'll tell her you called."

* * *

Niamh paced back and forth outside the small anglican church, frowning at her watch every few minutes. The sun had set over an hour earlier, and still no Alma.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say I was being set up," she muttered to herself, and vowed that if the young vampire did not appear in fifteen minutes, she would head back home.

* * *

Kit balanced the bowl on top of the inventory ledgers, and started up the stairs to Niamh's flat when he heard the front door open.

"Fitz? Is that you?" He took two steps back down the stairs, craning his neck to check the front room.

"I'm afraid not."

* * *

"Kit?" Niamh frowned. "Kit? I thought I told you to lock up? The blinds are still up, and the lights in the shop—" She froze at the sight of the foyer. Papers and shards of pottery littered the floor, the brass lamp from the desk was overturned, casting odd shadows. The wall safe was open, the door half torn off it's hinges, the photograph that covered it ripped and sliced by the broken frame.

Shattered glass and blood on the floor.

Blood.

"Where's the book?" A voice hissed in her ear, and it was all she could do to register the words with her eyes fixed on the smear of blood, trying to determine if it was Kit's or Fitz's.

"I don't know what you're talking about." She forced her heart to still, her voice devoid of all emotion.

"Oh I think you do, and I could get the answer easily enough, if I wanted to. But it would be so much less painful if you simply told me."

"Why? Why do you want it?"

"Ah, but I don't want it at all. However, Nicholas does, and for that reason alone I'll make sure he never gets it."

"Because you'll lose him? I know who you are, Lacroix."

"I'm flattered to be recognised."

"Aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"I am very hard to kill, my dear, unlike yourself."

"I think you might be surprised." She actually smiled, he could feel it in the semi-darkness of the shop.

"You're very devoted to our Nicholas, aren't you?" He laughed, a hollow, empty sound that grated on her nerves like glass in a wound. "But I think, given the opportunity, pain can be quite an inducement." His hands tightened around her throat, but she remained calm and limp. He frowned.

"I have a very high tolerance for pain." Niamh sighed, but remained still all the same. "Go ahead, kill me. You'll never find the Abarat."

"Such a pity." Lacroix crooned, and she could feel his breath on her neck, and then the pain.

He could taste the centuries in the sweet copper tang, and his eyes grew wide, reflecting like a cat's in the darkness as he spun her away from himself.

"You...!" He seemed surprised, and with a flash of sorrow she realised the blood on the floor couldn't have been Fitz's, else he would have known. Known what she was from her taste.

Which meant it could have been Kit's. Or worse, Nat's.

She forced the thought aside, a hand pressed to the sticky puncture marks slowly oozing hot blood down her neck. "What about me? You want to kill me, vampire? I am ready to die. I do so want it all to end, every last moment of it." She pulled the katana down from the wall display, her bloody fingers leaving marks on the wall and streaking the lacquer of the scabbard black in the dim light. "Take my head."

All you are will be lost, her mind screamed. *There will be no Quickening*. Still she presented him with the sword, and stood, waiting. Lacroix looked from the sword to Niamh, and she thought she could hear the wheels turning in his twisted little mind.

"You're like *him*." He said it with wonder, and she regarded him blankly.

"Whom?"

"*Him*. The priest. Darius."

"What do you know of Darius?" Her voice was filled with anger and pain and hatred, and she stepped towards him with each word. He almost stepped back, driven back by the force of the emotion in her voice. Almost.

"Ah, yes, I know your Darius."

"Knew him. He's dead." Her voice went flat again.

"I thought a church stopped your kind as much as it did mine."

"Aye, it does *my kind*. He was not killed by *my kind*. He was killed by a sick, jealous bastard who was not stopped by crosses and holy water." He knew by her implication that she was equating him with Darius's killer, and ignored it for the time being. He was too shocked to learn that a man perhaps older even than himself had been laid low by a mortal.

He, Lacroix, would never have stood for such a thing. But then, that had been the difference between them.

"What are you waiting for? Kill me. I have so little left to live for." She knelt on the wood floor, ignoring the chill that crept into her bones. Still he stood there, holding the sword and staring at her stupidly. "Damn you, do it!"

"No," he said quietly. "You want it too much, little girl." He reached down and lifted her head so she was forced to meet his eyes. "And I do not grant favours." And then he was gone before she could move.

"Damn you." Niamh whispered, clutching the katana in her cold hands, silent tears streaming down her face. "Damn you."

* * *

The phone rang, and Nick practically flew across the flat to snatch it.

"Niamh?"

"Is Nat with you?" She sounded hoarse, as if she had been crying, which, in fact, she had been.

"Yes. What is it? What's wrong?"

"He came for the book."

"Who came? Niamh, are you alright?"

"Kit's gone. There was blood on the floor. I think he came for the book, but he didn't get it, Nick. He has no idea where it is, that must be why he took Kit."

"Who came? Who took Kit?"

"Lacroix."

* * *

At the other end of the line Nick's already pale face grew ashen as he replaced the receiver.

"Is she okay?" Nat's eyes were dark with worry.

"I don't think so." Nick said softly. "She's fine. But I don't think we are. Not any more."

FOREVER

* * *

"Alma?" Janette swept through the back rooms of the club, brows knit with annoyance. "That girl... she has no sense of priorities. *Alma!*" There was no answer. She sighed, and stood in the hallway almost comically, hands on her hips. "One of these days... one of these days I'm going to *fire* her."

"Literally?" A lazy drawl reached her ears, and she whirled around.

"You! But... you're dead."

"Rumours spread so quickly, now-a-days." Lacroix smiled, sending a chill down her spine. "I'm quite alive, so to speak."

She walked past him, into her office, and froze at the sight of a halfdead boy tossed onto her settee like a discarded rag doll.

"Who is that?"

"An immortal girl's pet, and the bait for my trap."

"Immortal—Niamh! This is Niamh's boy?"

"You know her? Of course you do, how silly of me. Nicholas always did have such a tight circle of friends. I've had the pleasure of the lady's company, alas only for a moment. Right now she should be running like a scared rabbit straight to our Nicholas's bolthole."

"How do you know?" Janette played devil's advocate with relish, almost hoping against hope that what she said might be true. "How do you know she won't come after you herself?"

"She will, because I will it. She may be immortal, but her mind is just as malleable as any other. And I tasted her blood. I may not control her as I have some, but whether she realises it or not, she cannot destroy me if I do not let her."

* * *

"I'll kill him." Niamh paced back and forth across Nick's living room, still shaking with fury and terror. "I'll spit his head on a pike. If he so much as touches a hair—"

"Calm down."

"Calm down? *Calm down?*"

"Yes. I need you to think clearly. Are you sure it was Lacroix?"

"Yes. Oh yes. The bastard whoreson *slug* told me so himself.... This was after sending me on a wild goose chase to the University—"

"Slow down. How?"

"Alma called, he must have gotten to her first. She said she had some information about the abarat and want to meet at St. Aquinas instead of the Raven. When I left he must have gone to the shop and found Kit."

"And the abarat?"

"It wasn't in the safe, Lacroix searched it. Fitz must have it."

"And where's Fitz?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. He left this morning and as far as I know hasn't been back. Once he sees the shop, he'll know to come here I'm sure. I pray he has it. It may be our only bargaining chip." She sank onto the couch, face in her hands as she hastily wiped away angry tears. "This is all my fault."

"Don't blame yourself. Lacroix is my daemon. Everything he does is designed to hurt me, and your only sin is being my friend."

"You don't understand. Kit is my responsibility. He doesn't know what I am or what you are. He thinks he's looking after me instead of the other way 'round, a poor young antique dealer who's taken over the family business. I should have sent him on vacation the moment this all started. I should have known someone would have come after the book."

"But Lacroix was dead. None of us could have anticipated this." Nat had watched all of this, from the rage to the blame to the fear and clenched her fists to keep her hands from shaking. Lacroix was determined to turn their world upside down, and was succeeding. "You can't blame yourselves."

"You're right." Nick cringed. Nat was constantly chiding him for taking responsibility for things that were outside his control. He supposed it was his upbringing. Nick's eyes suddenly grew wide. "You said Alma called you?" Niamh nodded, and he was suddenly at the phone, having moved to quickly for her eyes to register.

* * *

Janette almost jumped as the phone rang. She reached to answer it, but Lacroix moved it out of her reach, *tsk*ing and wagging a finger.

"Not just yet. Let's let him stew a bit first. The phone rang for what seemed like forever, and then was finally silent.

* * *

"No answer," Nick snarled, slamming the receiver down and somehow managing not to turn the device into a mass of twisted plastic and metal.

* * *

Janette leaned back in her chair, regarding her master with cool, impassive eyes. "So what rock have you been hiding under, hmmm? How did you survive that little bonfire you set last year?"

"Please. Allow me to retain some secrets, my dear. It's none of your concern."

"Why do you want Niamh?"

"The book."

"Ah. I should have guessed. Like a little boy, you can't stand to have your toys taken away from you. You must play with them until they break."

"Very astute. I would watch my tone, however, if I were you."

"How very glad I am that I am not you." Her smile was icy, and she sucked in her breath as Lacroix leaned in very close to her and smiled.

"Wait."

* * *

As Nick snatched up his jacket, Nat grabbed his arm. "Where are you going?"

"The Raven. He has to be there."

"What about Janette?"

"She can't handle him."

"And you can?"

"I have to try." Nick shrugged.

"Then I'm coming with you." Niamh retrieved her trench and sword from one of the chairs, and Nat sighed.

"You're forgetting something. You may well be nigh invulnerable, but Lacroix knows how to kill you both."

"We'll be careful, Nat." Nick gave her a quick hug.

"What about Fitz? You don't know where the book is, why put all the pieces into Lacroix's hands? The two of you aren't thinking clearly. If you go there, what's to stop him from just taking what he wants? All he has to do is use you as bait, and Fitz and I come running, abarat and all. *Think*, Nick."

"I am thinking."

"No. No, you're not. You yourself said the book may be your only bargaining chip for Kit's life." Nat's eyes grew dark with worry. "It could just as easily have been me he took, or Schanke. But he was being rash, grabbing the first mortal he found, knowing that you would be honour bound to help Niamh."

"And Janette." Nick clenched and unclenched his fists.

"And Janette." Nat nodded. "It's a trap, and you'd be walking straight into it."

"Do we have any other choice?" Niamh sat down on the arm of the sofa.

"Yes. Right now, Lacroix is holding all the cards, calling all the shots. He is controlling you, whether you believe it or not. But he hasn't made his move yet. He hasn't contacted us."

"Should we let him?" Niamh couldn't keep the anger out of her voice.

"Yes. At least, to find out where we stand."

* * *

Fitz whistled as he walked down Yonge, patting his pocket and feeling the comforting shape of Darius's book. The chaps at the University had been very helpful, as he knew they would be.

Fitz prided himself on taking the initiative. Niamh and her policeman friend were obviously too close to the subject to think clearly, and it made perfect sense to talk to people who delighted in the intellectual puzzles of translating sanskrit and didn't have a stake in curing immortality.

The fact that one of them was a lovely associate professor named Cherise, who was by some amazing coincidence quite single and quite inviting was, as far as Hugh Fitzcairn was concerned, a happy bonus for him.

As he approached the shop, he prepared himself for Niamh's expression. After all, he had made off with the book without telling anyone where he was going. That, and he had cracked her safe. She might be annoyed by that.

Still, it was all for the good. He smiled, and fit his borrowed key in the lock.

* * *

The phone rang. The three of them jumped, and once again Nick answered, barely controlled fury shining in his expression.

"What do you want?" He growled.

"That's hardly good telephone manners." It was a surprised English voice. "Is this Detective Knight?"

"Fitz?" Nick's eyes widened, and Niamh jumped off the couch and picked up the portable.

"Fitz, where are you?"

"Niamh, my dear! I was hoping to find you there."

"Are you at the shop?"

"Yes, and I found it quite a mess. I took my chances with your redial button."

"Fitz, listen to me carefully. Do you have the book?"

"Why, yes. I'm sorry to have stolen it away, but I had an astounding revelation quite early this morning—"

"Thank God. Look, I need you to bring it here this instant. It's very important. Kit's life is at stake." She proceeded to give brief directions, and when she hung up, it was with a sigh of relief. "I don't know how much of a bargaining chip it may be, but it's something."

Tom '94

Who waits forever, anyway?

- Queen, "Who Wants to Live Forever"

Part III "Forever"

LACROIX WATCHED THE DANCING mortals with some amusement. They had begun filing into the club a few hours after sundown, completely unaware of the tiny struggle for power occurring in the back room.

He left the doorway, closing against the pounding music and cigarette smoke, and was greeted by Janette's scowl.

"Why must you involve me in your games, Lacroix?"

"Because, my dear, you are already a part of them."

"And the boy?" She gestured to the unconscious Kit. "Were such crude methods really necessary?"

"So now the student seeks to rebuke the master? You have grown bold in my absence."

"I have *grown up* in your absence, Lacroix. I'll not be your pawn any longer." It may have been false bravado, Janette thought, but it still felt damn good.

It would have felt better if she could stand up without using the desk for support. Her legs refused to obey her, thanks to sheer terror. That he could still terrify her made her furious with herself, but there was nothing she could do. She flinched as he ran a finger along her jaw, and then gripped it painfully.

"Your only purpose in this particular game is to serve as bait along with this wrenched mortal here. I trust you can manage that quietly, yes?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"There is a nasty little rumour going around that our Nicholas has a copy of the abarat, and it striving for a 'cure' from this existence. I maintain the only true cure is death, which I would be happy to provide. Still, kids today... They simply have no respect for their elders."

"That's not what I asked. I asked why you won't let us go."

"Because you haven't broken yet, my little toy." He handed her the phone, and she dialled nervously.

* * *

The phone rang, and this time it was Niamh who flew to catch it.

"Hello?"

"Niamh?"

"Janette." Nick was at her side, and Nat picked up the extension. "He's there, isn't he."

"Yes."

"And Kit?"

"He's alive."

For now, Niamh's mind finished for her, and she swallowed nervously. "What does *he* want?" She wouldn't even say the name.

"A trade."

* * *

"They're coming." Janette carefully placed the receiver in the cradle. "Do you know what she is?"

"An immortal? I know all about them. I even knew one of them."

"The priest, Darius."

"He was General Darius when I knew him. His armies would have covered the world like ants on a honeycake. Instead he chose *peace*." He filled the word with contempt. "Alexander thought he had beaten him, but he rose again, and went farther than Alexander could have dreamed."

"And you knew him."

"I was curious about his kind. Do you know they kill one another?"

"Yes."

"They will fight until only one of them remains, so they are not truly immortal, for which he envied me. Of course, he wanted to live simply to see what wonders would come. He was overly optimistic, as well as ridiculously fond of the mortal race. Yet their kind walk abroad in the day. I envied him that."

"All of the pleasures, and none of the drawbacks of immortality?"

"Something like that. Of course, they cannot propagate their species. A handful of them are born every few centuries, and they are all sterile. Rather a pity."

"They would have overpopulated the planet in a few centuries." Janette reminded him, and he dismissed the thought immediately.

"Obviously that is what their game is for, an aggressive form of natural selection."

"There is nothing obvious about that conclusion." Janette scowled, annoyed by Lacroix's logic. She had forgotten how his condescending attitude could irk her. "Do you think our kind could be related? So similar..."

"I do not know. From the dawn of time they came, Darius once said. From the dawn of time. I do not know how long our kind have walked the earth. All I know is, when the last of their kind have battled till there is only one, our kind will still be waiting in the wings, like cat's ready to lick up the cream."

"You are mad, Lacroix."

"Gloriously so."

"This Darius died, you know. Killed by a mortal while he was still on holy ground."

"So the little Irish girl told me. She was very angry, and I could also taste her sorrow. She loved him."

"Did she? As I friend, I knew..."

"Oh no, I could see it in her eyes, taste the longing in her blood. She was furious that he had been stolen from her. I could almost appreciate it. Perhaps our two races were created to compliment one another? After all, think of it, an immortal lover who cannot die and can guard you while you sleep during the day paired with the strength of the vampire, so guard them against each other, with their swords and knives and axes."

"A pretty fairy tale, I'm sure."

"We are the stuff of children's stories, my dear Janette. Never forget from whence you came."

"How could I with you here to remind me?"

"Did you enjoy your little vacation?"

"I had hoped it would be permanent. No offense." Her eyes smouldered as she played his little word games. Lacroix was ever one for dancing, be it with words or actions.

He played with his food.

It annoyed her.

"Will you miss your Nickolah when he's gone?"

"More than I ever missed you."

* * *

"I'm going with you," Nat put a hand on Nick's shoulder.

"Oh no you're not."

"Nick," Nat was poised for a speech about trying to do too much on his own, but Nick put his hand over her mouth.

FOREVER

"You've never faced Lacroix. You don't know what you're up against. I have too much to worry about without having to worry about you as well." She said something against his hand, and he removed it so he could hear her.

"You're an idiot."

"I love you too." He kissed her forehead and went to collect Niamh, who was having a similar discussion with Fitz.

"Darius, if he were alive, bless him, would have my head if anything were to happen to you."

"Fitz, this is my fight. If he were one of us, and challenged me you would have no choice but to stand back and let us fight."

"But he's not one of us. He's faster and stronger, and he doesn't play by our rules."

"Well then, I won't either." She grinned at him, and Fitz scowled. "But this is about Kit, and Nick. And it's my fault. I've brought this down in their heads."

"That's very egocentric of you," Nick poked her in the shoulderblade. "And I thought we agreed to stop blaming ourselves."

"I will once this is all over. Fitz, you stay and guard Nat."

"*'Guard'* Nat?" Natalie folded her arms across her chest and glared at the pair of them. "Do I have a great big neon sign attached to my forehead that says 'easy victim, please attack'?"

"Yes." Nick and Niamh replied simultaneously.

"You two are scary."

"Stay." Nick wagged a finger at her as the elevator swallowed them and Nat sighed.

"Great, I went from sidekick to lapdog."

"My dear girl, I would never liken you to such." Fitz put his arm around her shoulders and steered her back towards the couch. "Why don't you tell me all about yourself?"

* * *

The Raven seemed no different, teeming with young, clueless people. But Janette's bartender glanced from Nick to the office door, a grim look on his face. Niamh clutched the hilt of her katana beneath her trench, nervously stepping closer to Nick. AS the music pounded on, they threaded their way across to the door and cautiously stepped inside.

* * *

"Nickolah..." Janette looked up from her desk, trying to look calm, and failing miserably.

"Where is he?"

"The alley. He said he didn't want to attract undue... *attention.* I don't like it. I don't like it that he has come out now, that he has been watching us all this time."

"We don't know that he has, we don't know how long it took him to recover."

"What about Kit?" Niamh was leaning by the sofa, inspecting a not yet old bloodstain with dread.

"I don't know." She shook her head, and they moved down the hall, to the back entrance facing the alleyway.

* * *

"We're here." Nick's voice rang in the empty space, bouncing off the brick walls.

Niamh felt Nick stiffen, and squinted as a figure separated itself from the darkness.

"Kit..." Niamh thought her heart would break as she saw her friend's blood spattered body in the lamplight. Lacroix was holding the boy at an arm's length out in front of him, licking his lips and sneering.

"Such concern. So typical." They were the first words Nick had heard from his master's throat in so long, and the sheer contempt beneath them sent a frisson on anger down his spine. It did more than that to Niamh, who has already at her tether's end. He heard the soft scrape of steel, and held her back.

"If he dies, I swear you will not live to see another sunset." Niamh growled, completely heedless of Nick's restraining arm. "He's done nothing to you! Nothing!"

"My dear girl, you cannot do a thing to harm me. As a matter of fact, you cannot do anything."

Niamh watched in horrified fascination as her hand lifted of its own accord and opened, her sword clattering to the ground. She stared at it, trying to move her fingers just a hairs-breath, and found she was completely separated from conscious control.

Nick stepped between her and Lacroix, who merely laughed.

"I could make you do things you never dreamt of. I could make you kill, and you wouldn't be able to stop yourself." She reached down and picked up her sword, and found herself levelling it at Nick's neck. "I could even make you kill him, little girl. If you were fast enough, of course."

Nick wrenched it from her grasp in less time than it took her to blink, and an apology shone in her eyes as she tried to break the master vampire's control.

"Which you would never be." Lacroix finished, still smirking. "But think of it, your strongest desires, your will of which you are so proud, all betray you. How does it feel?"

"Like I'm a puppet. And you're pulling the strings. So all I am is a tool, and I have nothing to feel guilty for. You may be able to control this body, even this mind. But I would not be responsible."

"Fine words. But only words. It would tear at you, piece by piece, until there was nothing left. Because I know your kind. The pair of you, so alike. So easy to predict exactly what you'll do, or won't do."

"Why the games? Why always the games?" Nick's eyes flashed yellow, his voice practically a growl.

"Life is a game. She knows it. So do you."

"So what are the rules of this particular game?"

"Give me the book, and you'll have the boy." Lacroix smiled, shaking Kit's limp form like a terrier with a rat.

"Give me the boy first." Nick and Niamh didn't move, and Niamh held her sword still, even though he had demonstrated its uselessness. It was all she could do, to focus herself enough to keep from shaking. If she showed him fear, allowed herself to feel it for even a second, he would destroy her.

"My my, little Nicholas. And who are you to give orders?"

"Someone with something you want."

"Now, see, you've gotten it all wrong. *I* have something *you* want. You have something I want only because you want it so very much. We must keep these things straight after all. Now, give me the book."

"We'll exchange them at the same time." Niamh took a step forward. "You could probably take it from me as easily as you have just demonstrated, but I like to think of you as an honourable fiend, so please don't disappoint me."

"Such strength in the face of her adversary, and so polite as well, dear Nicholas. You can learn a great deal from her. No doubt she never set fire to her mentors."

"My mentors never tried to kill me or those I love." Niamh regarded him coolly. "My mentors were not prone to mindgames, exerting control simply because they could, destroying out of contempt, judging from false pride. You have no right to compare!"

Lacroix snarled, and Niamh flinched, but held her ground. Nick bared his own fangs, eyes amber in the dim light.

"And yet your precious Darius is dead while I, the soul of evil, live on. That should tell you something."

"A cockroach in the nuclear winter of morality?" Nick raised a brow, a smile curling at the corner of his mouth.

"Only the good die young." He lifted Kit, whose head lolled like a rag doll's, as example. "The book. After all, I am an honourable fiend."

Niamh looked at Nick, who nodded. She removed the crumbling little volume from the pocket of her trenchcoat and held it up. "We trade."

"Certainly." He was so close she could feel his breath on her cheek, and she struggled to keep from crying out. He pulled the book from her hands. She held her breath as he let Kit slip to the ground, but like a mouse caught in a snake's gaze could not move. She could see Nick out the corner of her eye, also immobile.

Lacroix ran one finger lazily along her jaw, and she felt the pulse leap to life, throbbing so as she thought to echo in the alleyway. But only the vampires heard it. To mortal ears, all was silence.

"Take the boy, he is what you wanted," Lacroix addressed Nick, who scooped up Kit in his arms, the smell of dried blood nearly making him sick. He stepped back, waiting to see what his master's next move would be.

"*How* are you doing this to me?" Niamh could feel the suffocating presence of his mind clamping down on her control.

"To put it in scientific terms, you are being held under something similar to a post hypnotic suggestion, placed there by me through non-verbal communication aided by a chemical in your bloodstream, also placed their by me. Fangs are wonderful for that sort of thing, you know. In laymen's terms, once bitten, you are like a fly in amber."

Lacroix leafed through the book, making clicking sounds with his tongue as he scanned the pages. "Very interesting, you know.... this may even work as a cure. I never thought of it before." Niamh had not moved, *could* not, and he continued to circle her.

"You can read it?"

"My dear girl, this is a child's primer to me. Of course I can read it. And a very interesting read it will be." He slipped it into his pocket, patting it with a smile. Nick tensed, waiting for his chance...

Niamh gasped as Lacroix took the sword from her lifeless fingers. "No—" she hissed, straining against the invisible bonds.

"Ah, but I am feeling generous tonight, and you begged this favour." He levelled the sword slowly, enjoying the moment.

"No!" Nick screamed, dropping Kit and flinging himself towards the pair.

He was stopped in his tracks. He had forgotten Lacroix could do that.

Niamh bowed her head, waiting for the killing blow. Lacroix swung, and his smile faded as the sword stopped a hairs-breadth from her neck, a tendril of lightning creeping up the blade and wrapping around his wrist.

It was followed by another, a rope of blue-white light that climbed up his arm and twisted over his body. The ancient vampire went rigid with pain as Niamh's Quickening wrapped around him, yet her head remained firmly attached to her shoulders. The sword hit the pavement with the clear ring of a bell, and Niamh turned as the first wisp of smoke reached her nostrils. Power seemed to be wracking Lacroix's body, his features caught in an expression of surprise and wonder.

Nick and Niamh watched, transfixed, as Lacroix began to scream, his gloved hang bursting into flames, and the fire began to follow the path the lightning had taken.

"What is happening to me?" Lacroix screamed, spinning as he tried to put out the flames which cast dancing shadows on the walls of the alley. Before anyone could blink, they enveloped his entire body, and Niamh picked up her sword, stepping back and wincing as a small current of blue fire ran up her blade, crackling over her bare skin.

"The Quickening." She whispered as Lacroix's flesh seemed to melt like wax, and he disappeared in a blinding flash.

"Nick, the Quickening did this!" Niamh was horrified.

"Scatter the ashes." Nick growled, finally released from the fierce hold of his master's mind. "He burned before..."

"What?"

"He burned before, I don't know if it can stop him." He spread the ashes around with his foot, watching with satisfaction as some of them floated on top of rainwater in the gutter to disappear down a grate. "He had better not come back. Never again."

"Nick, you're not listening to me. He tried to take my head, *and the Quickening stopped him*. Do you know what this means?" Niamh leant down next to Kit, feeling for a pulse. It was weak, but there. "I wish Darius were alive, there is so much I need to know!"

"If wishes were horses..."

"Beggars would ride." Fitz finished the sentence, setting a match to his pipe. Behind him were Nat and Janette.

"Where is Lacroix?" Janette looked bewildered.

"Gone." Nick hugged her, and then Nat.

"I told you to stay at my place."

"Yeah, well, I got worried. What about the book?"

"Burned." Niamh sighed, brushing Kit's hair out of his face. Nat knelt along side her, checking his pulse and frowning.

"He's lost a lot of blood. We should get him to a hospital. He needs a transfusion, and immediate medical care." She started as Kit flinched, and his eyes opened a crack.

"Corrine?"

"Hey!" Niamh forced a grin. "You shouldn't be talking."

"I'm thirsty." He licked his dry lips, and Nat drew back as his eyes shifted from blue to amber.

"*Nick.*" Nat hissed, glancing up at him.

"Damn." Niamh whispered, wiping sudden tears from her eyes.

"So thirsty..." Kit tried to sit up, and Nick knelt down, motioning for the two of them to back away.

"Kit, my name's Nick. We're going to get you back to my place." He cursed Lacroix silently, wondering why he had done this, what twisted purpose it would have served. Perhaps just a small revenge.

Janette's eyes were fixed on the scorch mark on the pavement, her arms wrapped around herself as if she was cold.

"Now who is broken, hmm?" She whispered, and turned to go back inside the Raven.

* * *

"I'm a *what?*" Kit, having polished off a bottle without even noticing now stared at it with a look of pure horror.

"Vampire." Niamh finished for him. "How much do you remember?"

"I was getting ready to lock up when some psycho grabbed me. I thought he must have been on some serious shit, dusted maybe. Threw me across the room, and didn't even blink when I hit him with the brass lamp from the desk. He kept asking me about the book, and the next thing I know, I'm waking up in an alley."

"He had gotten all he could from you, and when the abarat wasn't in the safe, decided to use you as bait." Nick ran his fingers through his hair in a gesture of frustration.

"And after tonight, no more of this stuff." Nat took the empty bottle from the table. "I'm starting you on a steady diet of protein shakes."

"Are you a doctor?"

"Yes. Most of my patients are dead people, but yeah."

"Are you a vampire?" Kit looked from Nick to Niamh to Nat, still frazzled.

"No. Not me. I guess now I'm the token mortal in this little group."

"I am." Nick said quietly.

"Corrine?"

"Um... no. I'm not a vampire." She sighed. "I'm immortal."

"I don't follow."

"It's a long story. A really long story." She sat down next to him, taking his hand. "My name isn't really Corrine Michaels. It's Niamh. Niamh O'Brien. I didn't inherit Curiosities from my mother, I've owned the building since about 1939."

"1939. That would make you... what, Sixty? Seventy?"

"A little over nine-hundred."

"I'm really confused."

"Welcome to the family." Nat laughed. "How many semesters did you have left?"

"Two."

"How do you feel about night school?"

Kit looked from Niamh, to Nick, to Nat, and finally settled on Fitz. "Why do I have a feeling that my life is going to be terminally weird from now on?"

"Because it will be?" Niamh squeezed his hand. "Are you angry with me?"

"Corrie... Niamh..."

"You can still call me Corrie if you like. Quite a few people do."

"Corrie... I'm not angry."

"If it weren't for me, you would be safe and sound, not to mention mortal right now. Instead you get kidnapped by an ancient vampire hellbent on destroying Nick's chances of becoming mortal again."

"Is that what was in that book? A cure?"

"Yes, but it's lost now. It got burned up with Lacroix."

"Um... about that," Fitz scratched his temple, looking sheepish. "It's not completely lost."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, you see, the revelation I had this morning was to find someone who may be able to translate sanskrit better, and faster, than us, so I took the book down to the University, to see what I could turn up among academia..."

"And?" Nat gaped at Fitz.

"And a lovely young woman named Cherise Powers has a xerox copy of the entire thing in her office, and is hard at work, thinking to earn herself some notoriety among the other professors by adding the book to the library collection. She'll be terribly disappointed to learn the original has been accidentally destroyed, of course..."

"Fitz, I could kiss you!" Niamh threw her arms around his neck, giggling. "Ah, what the hell..." She planted her lips firmly on his, and thus they remained for some seconds, while Nat and Nick exchanged bemused glances, and Kit cleared his throat.

"Are you two kids quite finished?" Kit's eyes sparkled, and he had to admit, instead of being completely muddled, things actually began to make more sense to him now that the whole truth was upon him. Drinking blood, though... he wasn't sure how he was going to cope.

A shiver ran through him, but he tried not to let it show.

"Kit, you and Nick might be cured! This is great!" Niamh hugged him too.

"Yeah, well, don't start partying until I get the 'formula' to my lab and see what it's made out of, okay?" Nat hated to be a party-pooper, but she wasn't going to risk Nick getting his hopes up any farther than absolutely necessary.

Fear no more the hear o' th' sun
Nor the furious winters' rages;
Thou they worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages.
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

- Cymbeline, act IV, scene ii, lines 259-263

Epilogue "Home Art Gone"

NIAMH SANK ONTO HER bed, exhausted, and began combing the tangles out of her damp hair. The phone rang, and she picked it up midway through the first ring.

"Hello?"

"It's me, Nat."

"Hi."

"How're you holding up?"

"I could use a few less weeks like this one."

"Kit?"

"He seemed okay, but I know this is going to hit him really hard. His parents live out in Vancouver. I don't know whether we should tell them. If the cure doesn't work, I don't know what to do."

"You keep on living one day at a time."

"And if those days stretch into centuries? What then?"

"Hey, you're asking the wrong person. You and Nick have cornered that market."

"He talked all night. He made me talk, asking so many questions. He kept saying he wishes he could use me as a doctoral thesis, that I would be the prize of any history department."

"What did you say?"

"'Honey, I *am* history.'"

"You're evil."

"How 'bout Nick?"

"He's sceptical about the formula. I don't blame him. Assuming it translates into something I can understand, and even then, I would want to test it before ever using it on anyone..."

"I don't envy you your job."

"Yeah, well, what are friends for?"

"Some friend I was, getting a poor innocent kid mixed up in all of this. What if he learns to hate me? What if he turns? I mean, how could I possibly stop him?"

"Can I tell you a story?"

"As if I'm going to get any sleep for the next few nights."

Nat took a deep breath, shifting Sydney in her lap as the sun peaked through her blinds. "I had a little brother, his name was Richard...."

* * *

FOREVER

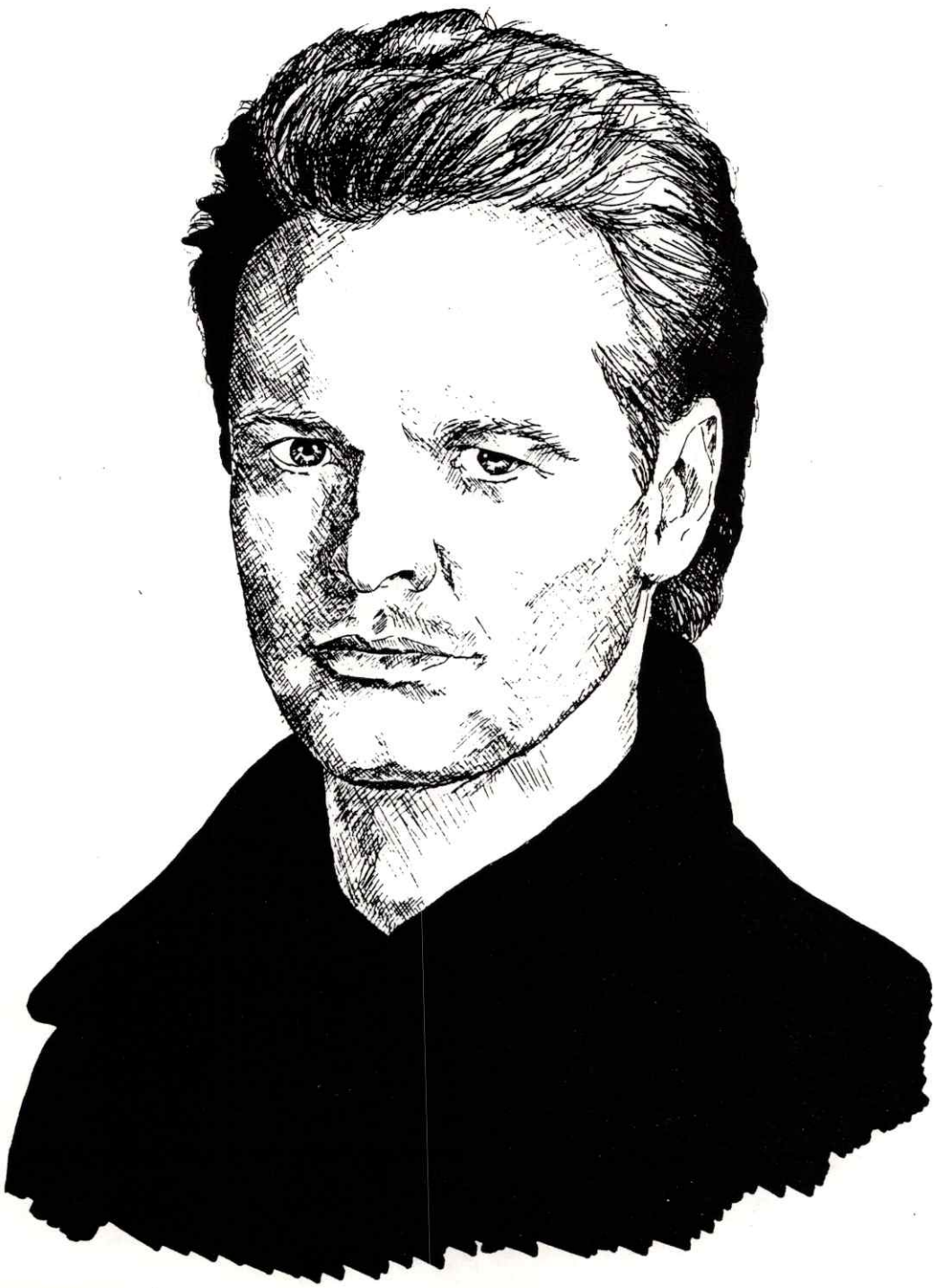
Alma stumbled into the Raven, definitely looking the worse for wear. The two vampires who has 'escorted' her left, leaving her to face Janette trembling.

"Uh... hi boss."

"We need to have a long talk." Janette steepled her fingers, and Alma shivered.

* * *

Padding across the loft in his pyjamas, Nick shut the blinds, wondering just how long it would be before he would be able to watch the sun rise without fear.



FOREVER

The Last Word

I discovered Forever Knight and Highlander almost simultaneously. Here's how it happened:

First, there was this New Year's Eve party at Tracy Scanlon's. At about 8 am the next morning, Avril DeBat pulled out a tape of four HL episodes. I had seen a few minutes of *Family Tree* one weekend home from University, but seeing as how the only person I had seen in the scant moments was Peter DeLuise, it hadn't really captured my imagination, but I was willing to give HL a try that Jan 1 morning.

I got hooked.

Those first four episodes were, in no particular order, *Free Fall*, *Innocent Man*, *Bad Day in Building A*, and *Road Not Taken*. I still have that tape around here someplace....

When I got back to Shampoo-Banana (U of I, Urbana, IL for those of us who've never had the dubious pleasure of attending it) I despaired until someone informed me I could catch HL on WGN. From that moment onward, I was *really* hooked.

Enter Amy Hull. The first week of Spring Break (I think that would be round about March, 1993) I spent with her in her teeny apartment in Carbondale, IL. Amy and Paula Sanders and I had edited a Robin of Sherwood fanzine (or rather, at the time we were supposed to *be* editing the zine, we didn't really finish it until that summer, but that's another fandom, another zine, and another story altogether...) together, and together we formed C'dale Cons. Just the three of us, marathonning all kinds of tv shows, renting movies, staying up all night reading zines and eating homemade chocolate-raspberry cheesecake and pickles....

I had enthused and gushed and basically talked non-stop about *Highlander: the Series* over the phone to the both of them since about January, and so I lugged down on the train with me ten or so tapes, with all the episodes of HL I had on tape. I think there were about fifteen, and that weekend the drinking game was born.

They repaid the favour by showing me *Forever Knight*. I fell hard, and a week later got three tapes in the mail, and I then got my college roommate's best friend hooked. I have no idea where she is now. Probably converting more fans even as we speak.

Amy and I have a symbiotic relationship. I get an email account, and convince her she should get one. She does, and discovers the FK mailing list. She gets me to join it, and I think we joined the Highlander lists about the same time. Thanks to the mailing lists, I decided to start this fanzine, and got

almost all my stories and contributors off of Internet. If it weren't for my friends, virtual and otherwise, this book wouldn't be here. Part of that has to do with a little story I started last summer called "The Rules of the Game". It is in Valerie Meachum's fanzine *Heartsblood* if you're looking for it. *"We'll Always Have Paris"* and *"Til Time..."* are its sequels, the latter having originally been posted on the Internet, and are here because I didn't know where else to send them, plus I like self-publishing. I don't have to change things that way (Have I mentioned I am insane, with a huge ego?). Still, I don't think this zine turned out all bad. Check out the address on the inside front cover for the address for letters of comments. Any received re: issue I will be printed in Issue II, uncut. That's my promise, good or bad, I live for feedback.

Anyway, I came up with the idea for *"From the Files of the Watchers..."* in the hopes that people who haven't read *"The Rules of the Game"* won't be completely lost when they come into *"We'll Always Have Paris"*. I know it's hard to break up a trilogy (soon to have a forth part, if I manage to sit down and start the bloody thing... Working full time is hell, I don't know how people manage to do it and stay sane...) but I promised Valerie the story long before I decided to start **Forever**, so do you forgive me?

Well, I've blathered on long enough. Hope to see you all again next year about this time for Volume II (she types with crossed fingers).

Oh, and for all of you who've wondered what I look like, here I am so you can spot me in a crowd (whether it's to throw rotten veggies, or roses, what will be will be I always say) and yes, that is an Animaniacs t-shirt I'm wearing, if you can't tell...

Okaylloveyoubye-bye!

Tara O'Shea
aka LJC
June 15, 1994

FOREVER

VOLUME I